

# PATHWAYS TO RURAL CAREERS IN TEXAS

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# Executive Summary



**A stronger rural Texas means a stronger, more resilient future for all Texans.**

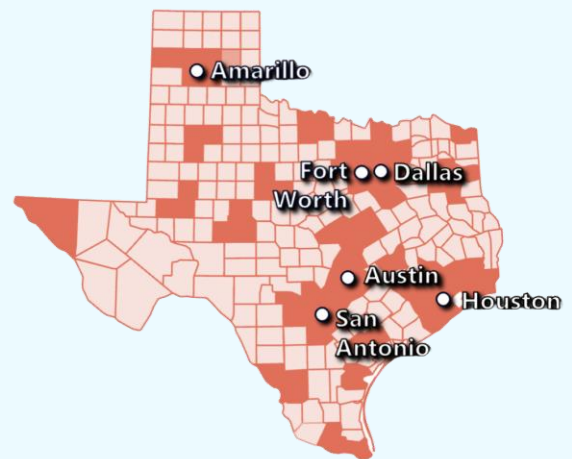
- Gov. Greg Abbott

**Rural Texas is critical to our state's economic future, and sustaining rural talent pipelines is critical to ensuring Texas' long-term economic prosperity.** Increasing access to postsecondary educational opportunities in high school, including expanding pathways to attain workforce credentials, will ensure rural Texans can access good careers and earn family-sustaining wages while staying in their hometowns.

**The Texas Legislature has taken important steps toward improving access to postsecondary educational opportunities through the expansion of rural workforce programming,** such as the Rural Pathways Excellence Partnership. But the state should continue to build up rural career pathways and workforce programs to support rural economic growth.

**The following analysis details a series of policy recommendations to increase career programming in rural high schools.** This includes efforts to scale existing programs targeted for rural Texas as well as statewide policy changes that increase career programming for all Texas high schools.

While Texas is home to some of the largest cities in the country, it is also home to a large rural population. **More Texans live in rural areas (over 4.7 million) than in rural areas of any other state, including an estimated 900,000 K-12 students — the most of any state in the nation.** According to the Texas Demographic Center, of Texas' 254 counties, 181 are rural. Rural Texas is also home to some of Texas' most important industries, including agriculture, energy and a burgeoning space industry that **together contribute over \$200 billion to the state economy.**



- Urban Area**  
Population  $\geq$  50,000
- Rural Area**  
Population  $<$  49,999

# Recommendations to Improve Rural Career Readiness



## Expand high school career credential models

With strategic investments in strengthening career programming in rural schools, Texas can expand education and workforce pathways that lead to high-wage, high-demand jobs.

01

### Support the Rural Education and Economic Pathways (REEP) Model

Meaningfully increase career educational opportunities by replicating models such as REEP, which use labor market data to identify postsecondary pathways closely aligned to local high-wage, high-demand workforce opportunities.

02

### Update Texas law to accommodate growing demand for the Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP)

Remove or adjust barriers in current law that slow the expansion of the R-PEP model among interested rural schools.

03

### Increase the number of Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs) in rural areas

Increase grants and per-student funding for P-TECH programs across rural Texas to provide more pathways for rural students to access work-based learning opportunities and career credentials.



## Set high expectations & make strategic investments

Texas needs to develop and adopt ambitious benchmarks for postsecondary credential attainment and hold ourselves accountable for success. At the same time, Texas needs to continue targeted investments that are tied to outcomes improvements.

01

### Integrate House Bill 8 (2023) Into Texas High Schools

Fully fund the new community college finance formula, which includes outcomes tied to the completion of dual credit courses and credential attainment, helping bridge the gap between high school and postsecondary education.

03

### Increase A-F Accountability Fairness By Rewarding The More Impactful Indicators

The A-F rating system should be updated to reflect the value of different college and career indicators on the long-term outcomes of students. Indicators tied to completion of credentials should be more heavily weighted than incremental steps.

02

### Improve Math Instruction and Proficiency and Address Low Science Performance

Ensure Texas has a qualified workforce to support emerging STEM industries by providing kindergarten through fifth grade teachers with high-quality professional development and additional pedagogical support through grants for instructional coaching.

04

### Align Tri-Agency Efforts Toward Supporting Communities in Increasing Credential Attainment

Create explicit cross-agency goals and strategies for the attainment of credentials of value in high school and support communities as they use data to improve program offerings.



# Expand Rural Career Programming

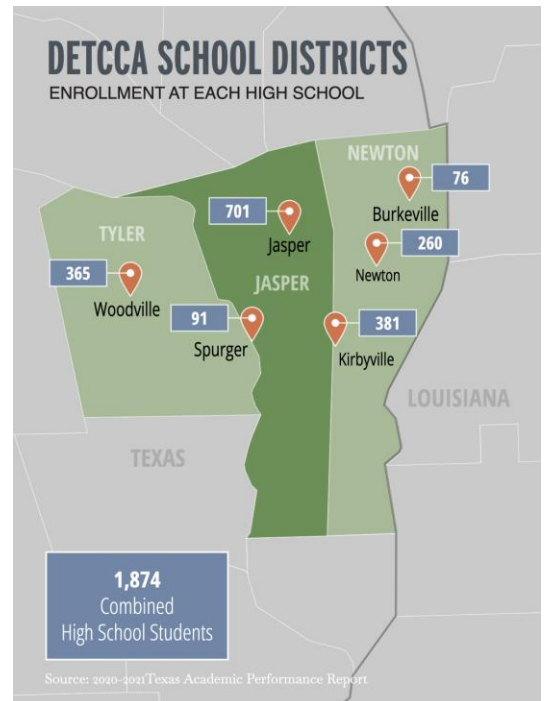
## 1. Support the Rural Education and Economic Pathways (REEP) Model

The Rural Education and Economic Pathways (REEP) is a collaboration of school districts and institutions of higher education in the Deep East Texas region that works to meaningfully increase college and career opportunities. REEP's work is based on using labor market data to identify postsecondary pathways closely aligned to local high-wage, high-demand workforce opportunities.

One of REEP's early success stories is the Deep East Texas College & Career Alliance (DETCCA), a collaboration of school districts and institutions of higher education in the Deep East Texas region. The alliance includes Burkeville ISD, Jasper ISD, Kirbyville ISD, Newton ISD and Woodville ISD along with Lamar Institute of Technology, Stephen F. Austin State University and Lamar State College Port Arthur.

These school districts and higher education institutions are using the Rural East Texas Economic Opportunity Analysis commissioned by the T.L.L. Temple Foundation to create postsecondary pathways aligned to opportunities in high-demand, high-wage jobs in the region.

DETCCA students have shown significant growth in the attainment of Industry-Based Certifications (IBCs), exceeding state performance rates following the implementation of the program.



**Recommendation:** Improve state wage and unemployment insurance (UI) data to better reflect the labor market needs of rural Texas economies. Request that the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) collect location, occupation, remote work, and part time/full time data. With these expanded data sets, models such as REEP can be more effectively replicated across rural Texas and tailored to address specific local workforce needs.

## 2. Update Texas law to accommodate growing demand for Rural Pathway Excellence Partnerships (R-PEPs)

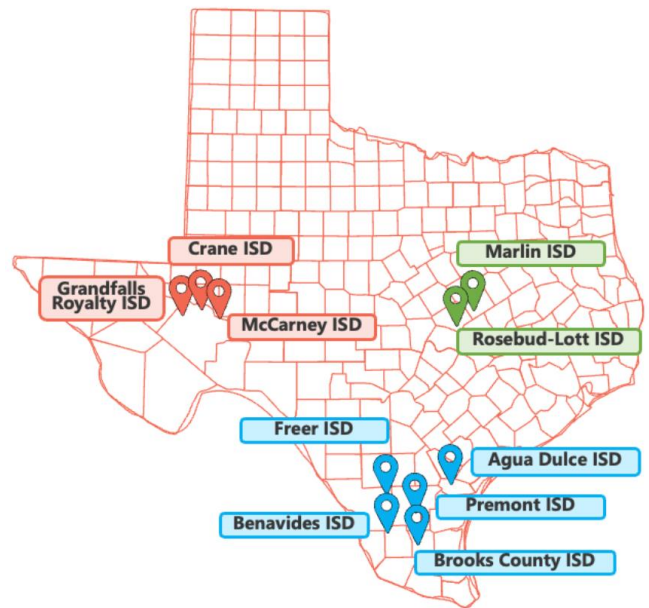
The Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP) is a scalable, innovative education and workforce development model that provides rural Texas students with college and career pathways responsive to and aligned with regional workforce demands.

Districts participating in R-PEP programs pool their resources to enhance the college and career pathways available to their students. These programs also partner with higher education institutions and industry partners to provide students with postsecondary opportunities such as industry-based certifications.

The R-PEP program is based on the work of a group of school districts in South Texas, known as the Rural School Innovation Zone (RSIZ). Districts in the RSIZ work together to provide their students with access to course offerings at one of five CTE academies, with each academy responding to different regional workforce needs.

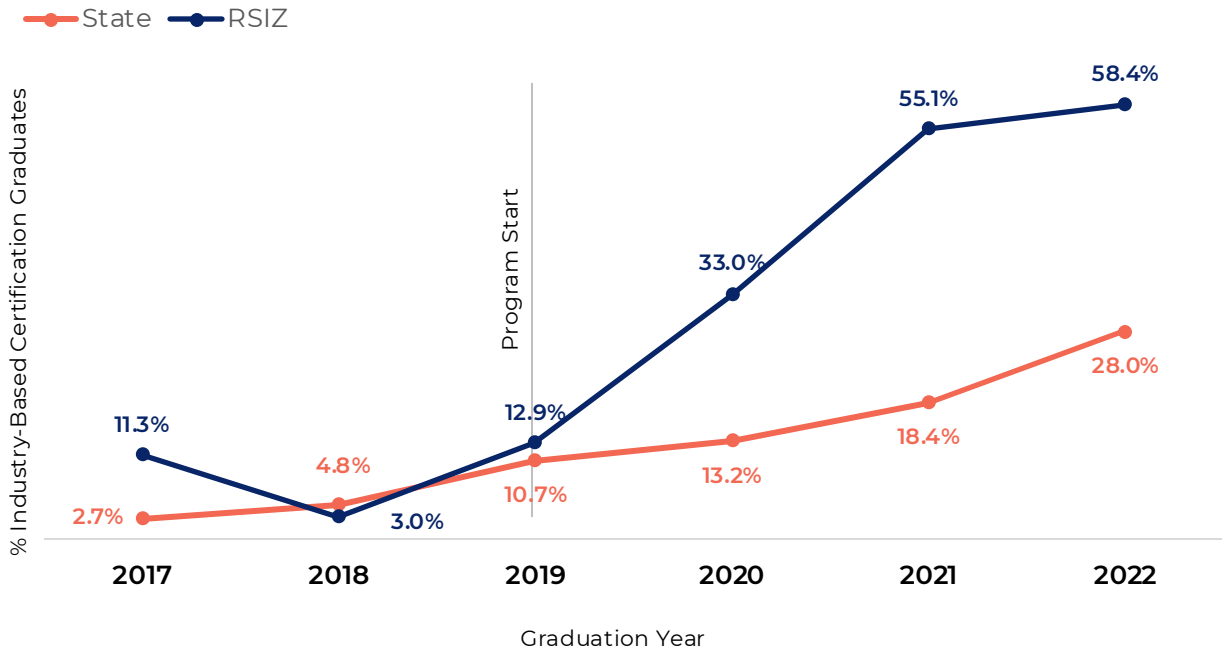
In 2023 the Texas Legislature provided dedicated funding to R-PEP programs to help expand the model across the Lone Star State. Today, the R-PEP model is used not only by the RSIZ in South Texas, but also by the Permian Basin Innovation Zone (PBIZ), which launched in 2023, and the Falls County Rural Collaborative, which launched in 2024.

3 statewide rural collaboratives follow the R-PEP model: the RSIZ, the PBIZ, and the FCRC. Each collaborative is made up of multiple rural school districts that partner together to deliver college and career pathways to students.



- Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ)
- Permian Basin Innovation Zone (PBIZ)
- Falls Country Rural Collaborative (FCRC)

## In the state's first R-PEP program (known as the RSIZ) students saw a rapid increase in Industry-Based Credential attainment



**Recommendation:** Current funding for R-PEP programs is capped at \$5 million in statute — enough funding for around 10-12 R-PEPs. However, over 600 school districts meet the minimum R-PEP enrollment threshold and 50 of these have expressed interest in launching an R-PEP since 2023. Updating Texas law to accommodate increased demand for the R-PEP model would help rapidly expand access to career pathways for rural Texas students. Considering the small size of many R-PEP districts, Texas should also provide \$200,000-plus start-up grants for districts to support standing up these programs.

### 3. Increase the number of Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs) programs in rural schools

The Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) model is an open-enrollment, statewide program that allows students to earn both high school and college credit simultaneously. This includes up to 60 college credit hours, an associate degree or an industry-based certification.

P-TECH programs partner with institutions of higher education as well as local and regional businesses and industries to connect students with internships and workforce-based learning opportunities or training. The goal is to help students obtain high-demand jobs.

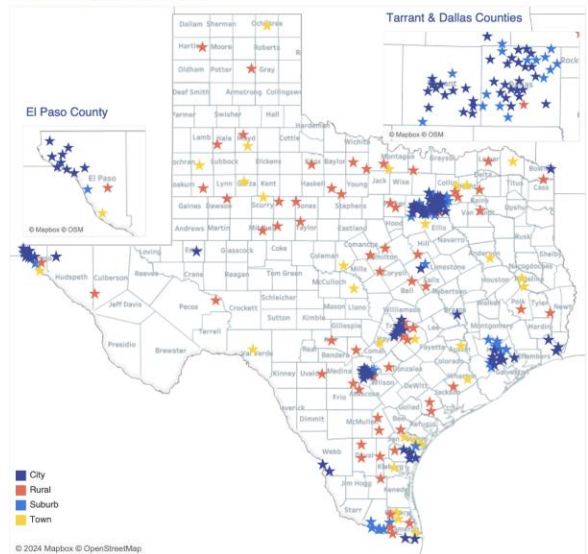
P-TECH students earn **more dual credit hours** and are **more likely to graduate high school** with postsecondary credentials compared to students from non-P-TECH schools. They are also **more likely to complete associate degrees** within two years of graduation, helping address critical workforce shortages in these areas.

By preparing students for the workforce and giving them a head start on their education, P-TECHs help bridge the gap for rural students who face unique challenges in accessing opportunities. This alignment with regional workforce needs ensures that rural students are equipped with the skills and credentials they need to thrive in their communities, contributing to local economic growth. However, P-TECH schools report elevated ongoing expenditures, from college-level textbooks to additional transportation costs, that require increased state funding.

**Recommendation:** Texas can increase the number of P-TECH programs in rural schools by funding \$200,000-plus planning grants to help districts set up new programs. Beginning a P-TECH program is an administratively heavy task. With smaller school systems, it is difficult to take on this work due to smaller staff sizes. Providing these grants would allow school systems to outsource or hire temporary staff to set up these programs. Texas can also better support P-TECH programs by increasing yearly funding for existing P-TECH programs from \$50 per student per year to \$150 per student per year.

72 schools in rural Texas school districts possess a P-TECH designation.

P-TECH Programs in Texas





# Set High Expectations & Make Strategic Investments

While efforts should be made to rapidly scale local programming, attention should also be paid to statewide strategies with a high ROI that will also lead to an improvement in rural outcomes. The following lays out statewide policy levers that will also support credential attainment by rural students.

## 1. Integrate House Bill 8 Into Texas High Schools

House Bill 8 overhauled community college finance in Texas, changing the formulas that determine how the state allocates funds to these institutions. The bill emphasizes the attainment of credentials of value, with a particular emphasis placed on funding students who are enrolled in dual credit coursework while they are in high school.

By incentivizing and funding innovative programs that align classroom-to-career programming with labor market needs, particularly at the high school level, HB 8 will result in an increase in credential attainment while in high school.

To fully realize these benefits, the Legislature must ensure that HB 8 is fully funded. Adequate investment in its outcome-driven framework will strengthen the pathways between high school, community colleges and the workforce.

## 2. Improve Math Instruction and Proficiency and Address Low Science Performance for All Students

STAAR results reveal declining math and science achievement year-over-year, with only 41% of students on grade level in math and only 42% on grade level in science, according to the most recent data. Of particular concern is the decline of fifth grade science achievement, which has reached an all-time low of 26% of fifth graders on grade level in science.

As the state doubles down on investing in strategies that increase career credentials in high school, it is critical that efforts are devoted specifically to increase math and science proficiency. Many jobs that require workforce credentials, like welding or nursing, also require students to have strong math and science skills. Rural students are not exempt from Texas' issues with these subjects and would directly benefit from statewide efforts to raise proficiency.

To improve performance, the state should provide kindergarten through fifth grade teachers with high-quality professional development to enhance math and science instruction; provide teachers with additional pedagogical support through instructional coaching; and explore opportunities to identify students struggling with math and science before the third and fifth grades and provide appropriate interventions to ensure those students get back on track.



### 3. Align A-F Accountability With Completion Goals

Texas' school accountability system, currently known as the A-F system, is a critical tool for parents, students and communities to provide parents and taxpayers with clear information on how well their school is doing at teaching reading, math, science and history as well as preparing students for life after high school. This system relies heavily on college and career readiness data as part of its calculations.

The current structure of the system treats all college and career readiness indicators the same. As an example, the system currently treats earning one dual credit course as equivalent to earning an associate degree. School districts should be awarded College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) points based on their impact on postsecondary outcomes, so that districts are driven to make programmatic decisions that are in the student's long-term best interest.

Improving the current accountability system will drive districts toward programs with the highest ROI for students and decrease the number of low-value workforce programs currently being offered in districts across the state. This impact will be felt statewide, including among Texas' rural schools.

### 4. Align Tri-Agency Efforts Toward Supporting Communities in Increasing Credential Attainment

The Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative, launched by Gov. Greg Abbott in 2016, seeks to support and promote efficient and flexible paths toward degrees and certifications linked to high-demand jobs. This goal is being accomplished through efforts at the Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and Texas Workforce Commission. The state should double down on its commitment to leverage the Tri-Agency strategy to accelerate efforts to increase credential attainment in high schools. This should include:

- Creating explicit cross-agency goals and strategies for the attainment of credentials of value in high school.
- Utilizing the Tri-Agency structure to help districts, postsecondary institutions, and communities have access to better data to identify regionally necessary career pathways and supporting them as they make programming decisions based on this data.

Since rural communities typically do not have the personnel or data infrastructure to produce and analyze regional workforce data, these efforts by the Tri-Agency would have an outsized impact in supporting rural communities across our state.



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