

Washington County, MD

Post Summit Report

Cradle-to-Career Readiness Initiative



AWARENESS
AND ASPIRATION



ACCESS AND
NAVIGATION SUPPORT



READINESS AND
FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS



ABILITY TO
PERSIST



FINANCING AND
AFFORDABILITY



CREDENTIAL-TO-CAREER
CONNECTIONS



2025-2026



GHC EDUCATION FORUM

Cradle to Career Education Summit Post-Summit Report

Community Vision: Every Washington County resident has a clear and attainable path to a living-wage career

About the Summit

Washington County faces a defining workforce challenge. **As the economy increasingly demands education and skills beyond high school, too many of our residents still lack the credentials needed to earn a living wage.**

In February 2026, the Greater Hagerstown Committee (GHC) Education Forum convened the Washington County Cradle-to-Career Education Summit, bringing together more than 70 leaders from nonprofit organizations, education, healthcare, business, and community services. The Summit built on our 2025–2026 Cradle-to-Career Readiness Report, which documented both meaningful gains and persistent challenges. Although we made tremendous growth in early childhood education and WCPS/HCC dual enrollment, we still have work to do in battling chronic K-12 absenteeism, low math proficiency, youth disengaged from work and school, and a post-secondary attainment gap that leaves too many residents without the credentials needed to earn a living wage.

The urgency stemming from these findings is hard to overstate. National research estimates that **by 2031, nearly 85% of U.S. jobs will require education or training beyond high school**, yet Washington County residents lag peers across Maryland in post-secondary completion at both the bachelor and associate degree levels. Economic realities compound this pressure: a single adult in Washington County must earn more than \$20 per hour to cover basic needs without public assistance, well above the current \$15 minimum wage. **Since income generally rises with educational attainment, completing at least two years of post-secondary education or training significantly improves our residents' odds of earning a living wage.**

Building on the legacy of the OnTrack Washington County initiative (2015–2021), this Summit gave community partners an opportunity to assess progress, examine persistent barriers, and identify the most promising strategies for accelerating post-secondary attainment and workforce readiness. This post-Summit report summarizes what we heard, what we learned, and where we believe the greatest opportunities lie. We hope it sparks conversation, prompts action, and serves as a resource for every organization committed to Washington County's future.

Who Was in the Room

The Summit convened more than 70 leaders representing education, business, nonprofit organizations, workforce development, healthcare, and community services. Participants included representatives from:

- Washington County Public Schools
- Hagerstown Community College
- University System of Maryland at Hagerstown
- Meritus School of Osteopathic Medicine
- Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics
- Local employers and industry partners
- Workforce development agencies
- Community and nonprofit organizations



Participants engaged in six facilitated breakout discussions, each focused on a distinct level of cradle-to-career success.

What the Summit Revealed: Cross-Cutting Themes

Participants in our breakout sessions worked across six interconnected “levers of change” that collectively shape the cradle-to-career journey: Readiness & Foundational Skills, Awareness & Aspiration, Access & Navigation Support, Credential-to-Career Connections, Ability to Persist, and Financing & Affordability.

Although each of our six breakout groups focused on a unique cradle-to-career topic, strong patterns of agreement emerged across all six groups. Participants repeatedly arrived at similar conclusions, suggesting deep community alignment on both the challenges and the path forward.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

1	Washington County has strong education and workforce partnerships
2	The challenge is coordination , not a lack of programs
3	Career awareness and the importance of post-secondary training must begin earlier
4	Coordinated, consistent messaging is needed to reach families and stakeholders equitably
5	Childcare and navigation barriers limit participation
6	Mindset and belief barriers affect aspiration
7	The classroom environment should mirror the workplace environment wherever possible
8	Success must be measured by credential completion

1. Washington County Has Strong Education and Workforce Partnerships

Participants were consistent in recognizing the community’s existing strengths. Washington County is not starting from scratch; rather, we have genuine infrastructure, genuine commitment, and genuine momentum.

- A. Kindergarten readiness has improved dramatically — Washington County now ranks 4th in the state, up from 23rd in 2017
- B. Dual enrollment at Hagerstown Community College has grown significantly, with 74% of the Class of 2025 earning dual credit
- C. CTE pathways, apprenticeships, and access to career coaches are expanding in both middle and high schools
- D. A collaborative culture exists across agencies, with strong willingness to share data and align efforts
- E. Washington County Public Schools is recognized as a national bright spot in literacy education

2. The Problem Is Coordination, Not Programs

Across every lever, participants identified a common thread: Washington County boasts numerous programs, partnerships, and resources but they are not yet working together in a cohesive, visible, and sustained way. The gap is not a lack of activity; it is fragmentation.

- A. Families experience the system as confusing and hard to navigate
- B. Information about opportunities is not reaching all audiences equitably or consistently
- C. Programs often operate in silos, with limited coordination across transition points
- D. Messaging is fragmented — different agencies use different language, channels, and messengers

“The challenge is not a lack of programs—it’s coordination.”

3. Career Awareness and the Importance of Postsecondary Training Must Start Earlier

Every group independently concluded that current efforts engage students and families too late. Career awareness, academic readiness, and family engagement must begin well before high school — in many cases, in elementary school or earlier.

- A. Career conversations and credential awareness should begin no later than 4th grade
- B. Pre-K expansion (especially for 3-year-olds) was identified as a high-leverage investment
- C. Engagement must reach parents and caregivers early in life — before mindset barriers take hold
- D. Early literacy and math must be prioritized as the foundation for all future pathways

“Career awareness must begin earlier.”

4. Coordinated, Consistent Messaging Is Needed to Reach Families and Stakeholders Equitably

Even where programs and pathways exist, they are not reaching all families — and participants were direct about why: the community’s messaging is fragmented, inconsistent, and often inaccessible to those who need it most. Different agencies use different language, different channels, and different messengers, leaving families — particularly those with lower incomes or less experience navigating education systems — without a clear picture of what’s available or why it matters.

- A. Families frequently receive conflicting or siloed information depending on which organization or school they interact with
- B. Messaging about post-secondary options and their wage and career benefits is not reaching families early enough or through trusted voices
- C. Low-income families, families of color, and first-generation college-goers are less likely to receive consistent, actionable information about pathways and credentials
- D. A shared community narrative — one that normalizes post-secondary attainment as the expected path and communicates a clear return on investment — does not yet exist
- E. Employers, healthcare providers, coaches, and community organizations represent underutilized messengers who could amplify consistent messaging across the county

5. Practical Barriers — Especially Childcare — Are Blocking Progress

Across multiple levers, participants identified childcare access and affordability as among the most significant and underaddressed barriers to educational persistence. Other practical barriers — transportation, cost of living, and navigation complexity — compound the challenge.

- A. Parents pursuing education often cannot find or afford childcare, especially outside of standard hours
- B. Cost of living and wage pressures make it difficult for families to prioritize education without financial support
- C. Navigation complexity — too many systems, too much jargon — discourages families from accessing available supports
- D. The **“some college, no degree” population represents a significant missed opportunity** that requires targeted re-engagement

6. Mindset and Beliefs Are as Important as Information

Summit participants were candid about a challenge that goes beyond awareness: many residents — and some students and families — do not yet believe that post-secondary credentials are attainable or worth pursuing. Generational patterns of low attainment, limited exposure to success stories, and a sense of learned helplessness are real barriers that information alone cannot overcome.

- A. Exposure to local success stories, role models, and visible career pathways builds belief and aspiration
- B. ROI messaging — clear, compelling data on wage outcomes by credential — is underutilized
- C. Post-secondary attainment must become the community’s default expectation, starting in grade school
- D. Multiple trusted messengers (employers, coaches, alumni, families) are needed to reach different audiences



7. Classrooms Life Should Mirror Work Life to Prepare Students for Careers

Summit participants emphasized that academic preparation alone is not enough — students need learning environments that reflect the expectations, culture, and rhythms of the modern workplace. Bridging that gap requires intentional design across K-12 and post-secondary settings.

- A. Workplace norms — punctuality, collaboration, professional communication, and problem-solving — should be embedded into classroom culture, not treated as separate "soft skills"
- B. Financial literacy must be integrated into career pathways so students graduate with the practical knowledge to manage earnings, benefits, and financial decisions
- C. Expanded workforce exposure — job shadows, employer partnerships, and work-based learning — should be a structured part of the student experience, not an add-on
- D. CTE and apprenticeship programs are strong models to build from, but access should be broadened so more students can participate earlier

8. The Goal Is Completion, Not Just Enrollment

A significant shift in framing emerged across breakout groups: the community must move beyond measuring access and enrollment to prioritizing credential completion. Getting students into programs is necessary but not sufficient.

- A. Chronic absenteeism was identified as a leading warning sign and driver of non-completion
- B. Students need sustained, personalized support at every transition point — not just at entry
- C. Success metrics should include completion rates, graduation rates, and post-credential employment outcomes
- D. Wraparound supports — including financial assistance, counseling, and childcare — must accompany pathway enrollment

“Success must be measured by completion, not enrollment.”

Top System-Wide Priorities Emerging from the Summit

While many innovative ideas emerged during the Summit, participants consistently converged around several high-leverage opportunities where coordinated community leadership could accelerate progress. **The following seven priorities rose to the top as the most urgent and promising areas for community action.**

#	Priority	What Participants Said
1	Expand & Modernize Childcare	Increase after-hours options, support childcare for parents pursuing education, and expand 3-year-old programming. Without childcare, persistence and completion stall.
2	Launch a Unified Messaging Strategy	Develop a shared, community-wide communication strategy centered on promoting post-secondary attainment with consistent language, multiple messengers, and early, equitable outreach to students, families, and employers. Messaging must move from fragmented to coordinated.
3	Address Chronic Absenteeism	Invest in early intervention, family engagement, and wraparound support to reduce absenteeism at all school levels. Attendance is foundational to every other lever.
4	Strengthen Credential-to-Career Alignment	Expand registered apprenticeships, deepen employer engagement, grow career awareness in elementary and middle school, and provide clear wage and ROI data to students and families.
5	Invest in Family Engagement & Mindset Shifts	Use storytelling, role models, and community events to build belief and normalize post-secondary attainment as the expected path. Address generational barriers through sustained, relationship-based engagement.
6	Focus on Post-Secondary Completion — Not Just Access	Track and act on completion rates, graduation rates, and employment outcomes. Specifically target the “some college, no degree” population with re-engagement and credential completion pathways.
7	Strengthen Workplace Readiness and Professional Skills	Embed workplace norms, financial literacy, and real-world exposure into classroom environments at every level. Partner with employers to expand work-based learning, job shadows, and apprenticeship access — so students graduate not just credentialed, but career-ready.

Looking Ahead: Possible Action Items

Immediate Opportunities (0–6 Months)

- Create a stakeholder communication platform to share new and existing stakeholder programs targeted at identified priorities, find partners to collaborate with, and share funding opportunities
- Form a cross-sector task force (WCPS, HCC, USMH, MSOM, employers, nonprofits, community partners) to develop a unified cradle-to-career messaging strategy
- Pilot community storytelling and return on investment (ROI) messaging campaigns in partnership with local trusted messengers
- Identify and map existing resources, programs, and funding streams to begin building a centralized navigation hub
- Add financing and credential navigation to the ongoing coalition agenda
- Host a business showcase to connect career coaches with employer partners and current apprenticeship opportunities
- Conduct an audit of existing workplace readiness practices across WCPS and HCC to identify gaps and bright spots in how classroom environments reflect workplace expectations



Near-Term Priorities (6–18 Months)

- Expand Pre-K 3 programming and increase family engagement in early childhood settings
- Launch a coordinated, multi-agency initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism at the elementary level
- Engage 16–24-year-old disconnected youth through community school managers and workforce pathway programs
- Create targeted re-engagement supports for the “some college, no degree” adult population
- Work with the Western Maryland Consortium, WCPS, and the Chamber to expand registered apprenticeship opportunities
- Integrate financial literacy into existing CTE and career pathway curricula across middle and high school
- Establish a structured work-based learning framework — including job shadows, employer site visits, and project-based partnerships — with clear participation benchmarks for students



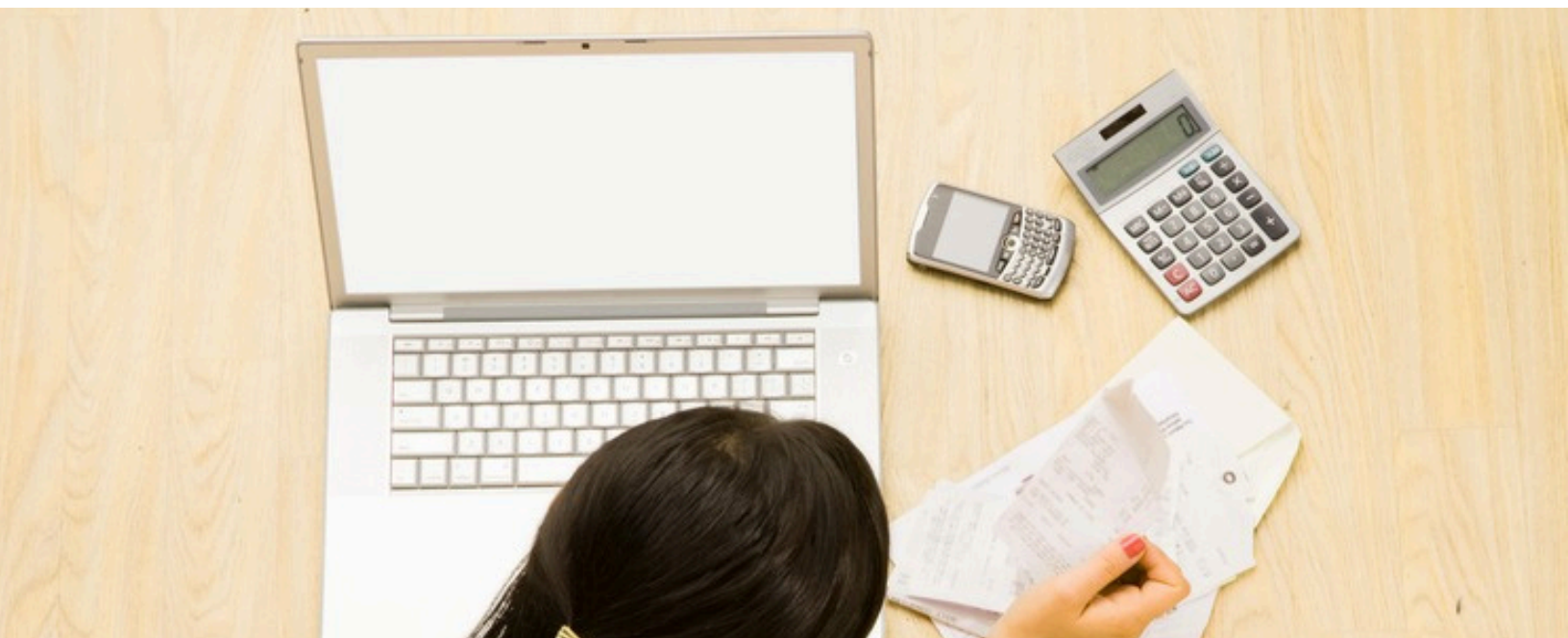
These action items are only a starting point, not a complete inventory of what's possible. If your organization is already doing or aims to do work in any of these areas, we want to know about it. Reach out to the GHC Education Forum to share your plan, identify opportunities to align efforts, and help ensure Washington County's cradle-to-career momentum keeps building.

Tracking Progress

Lasting change requires honest measurement. The following indicators reflect where Washington County stands today across the cradle-to-career continuum, from early childhood readiness through adult credential attainment. Tracking these metrics over time will allow the community to assess whether collective efforts are moving the needle, identify where progress is stalling, and make informed decisions about where to invest.

Metric	Current Measure	Goal
Kindergarten readiness rate	55.4%	70%
3rd grade literacy proficiency	51.5%	70%
Math proficiency across grades	30%	70%
Chronic absenteeism rate	29%	15%
High school graduation rate	89.7%	95%
Post-secondary enrollment rate (12 months post-graduation)	53.6%	65%
Free and Reduced Meal (FARM) rate (proxy for economic mobility)	61.5%	45%
KEY METRIC: Adults ages 25+ with associate degree or higher	33.7%	60%

These numbers tell a story of real gaps — and real opportunity. The targets set alongside each indicator represent our community's shared commitment to measurable progress, outlining clear, time-bound goals that will allow us to hold ourselves accountable and track whether our collective efforts are moving the needle.



Conclusion

The 2026 Cradle-to-Career Education Summit demonstrated something important: Washington County already has the relationships, the programs, and the will to move the needle. What emerged most clearly is a shared sense of urgency and a shared conviction that the community does not need to build new systems from scratch, but to better align, communicate, and sustain what already exists.

The path toward increasing post-secondary attainment now feels clear - we must engage families earlier, remove practical barriers to education and training, coordinate and align on key messaging, and relentlessly focus on post-secondary completion. By doing so in **collaboration**, Washington County can ensure that every resident has a clear, attainable path to a living-wage career.

But none of this happens without each of us taking the next step. Don't let this report sit on a shelf. Bring these findings back to your board, your staff, and the people you serve. Identify one or two concrete actions your organization can take right now — actions that advance these priorities and still align with your mission. Reach out to a partner you haven't collaborated with yet. Start a standing conversation, a monthly lunch, or a quarterly check-in with peers across the cradle-to-career spectrum to share what's working and what isn't.

The Summit was a moment. What happens next is up to all of us.

The GHC Education Forum is grateful to the more than 70 leaders who brought their time, candor, and commitment to this work. We look forward to reconvening in 2027 to measure progress, celebrate wins, and deepen our collective effort to ensure **every Washington County resident has a clear, attainable path to a living-wage career.**



*We look forward to reconvening in 2027
to celebrate progress, share what has been accomplished,
and strengthen our collective work toward living-wage
careers for all Washington County residents.*

