

RESEARCH • POLICY • PRACTICE

Insights Report

Connecting El Paso students to credentials of value and high-demand regional careers

Fall 2026



BUILDING A TALENT STRONG EL PASO

El Paso's economy is growing, and with it the demand for skilled workers in healthcare, technology, advanced manufacturing, construction, and the trades. This report explains what the region stands to gain when school districts, El Paso Community College, educational organizations, employers, and philanthropy operate as one connected system — and how the Ascend partnership is building that system.



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GROWING A TALENT STRONG ECONOMY

El Paso's economy is growing, and with it the demand for skilled workers in healthcare, technology, advanced manufacturing, construction, and the trades. These careers require education or training beyond high school, provide living wages that support economic mobility, and strengthen El Paso's long-term competitiveness.

By 2030, more than six in ten Texas jobs will require education or training beyond high school.

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, citing Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce projections

Across the Borderplex, employers seek to fill thousands of these positions each year, but the supply of credentialed workers is not keeping pace with demand. Many of these careers are within reach of students who complete an industry-based certification, a Level I or Level II certificate, or an associate degree in two years or less.

Every credential a student earns creates value in three ways. Graduates gain access to careers that sustain families. Employers gain the skilled workforce they need to grow. And El Paso retains the talent its schools have spent thirteen years preparing. Credential attainment is therefore not only an educational priority — it is an economic development strategy.

Whether more El Paso students earn the credentials that lead to these careers depends on how effectively school districts, El Paso Community College, and regional employers work together.

INVESTING IN TALENT OUTCOMES

To meet this growing demand, Texas adopted Building a Talent Strong Texas, its long-term plan to align higher education with workforce needs. The plan calls for 60% of working-age Texans to hold a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential of value by 2030. Through high-demand field designations and credentials-of-value standards, the state uses labor-market and earnings data to direct attention and funding toward programs connected to occupations with strong employer demand, competitive wages, and projected growth — and toward credentials likely to provide students with economic value.

This gives school districts and colleges a shared economic-development agenda: connect students to pathways that lead from high school preparation to postsecondary credentials and careers needed by the regional and state economies. Texas backs this strategy with outcomes-based funding. House Bill 3 (2019) established the College, Career, and Military Readiness Outcomes Bonus, which provides funding to school districts for each graduate prepared for postsecondary success. A district can earn up to \$5,000 for every economically disadvantaged graduate who meets readiness criteria, earns a postsecondary credential, or enrolls in college. House Bill 8 (2023) applies this same principle to community colleges, rewarding El Paso Community College when its students complete credentials in high-demand fields. Senate Bill 1786 (2023) sets the standard for these credentials, requiring that they lead to employment at a wage sufficient for economic self-sufficiency.

Read together, these laws create a unique alignment between two systems that have traditionally operated independently. Consider a student who meets the Texas Success Initiative standard and completes a Level I certificate in a high-demand field before graduating from high school. That single accomplishment earns an HB3 outcomes bonus for the district and generates HB8 funding for El Paso Community College. If the student then enrolls at EPCC and persists through census day, both institutions benefit again. The impact does not end with one student's success. The resulting funding flows to the district and the college and can be reinvested in advising, pathway development, instruction, and student services — creating a continuous cycle of investment that prepares more students for high-demand careers and strengthens the Borderplex economy.

Sources: Texas House Bill 3, 86th Legislature (2019); House Bill 8, 88th Legislature (2023); Senate Bill 1786, 88th Legislature (2023); Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Building a Talent Strong Texas.

CLOSING THE COORDINATION GAP

Texas has created incentives across K-12 and higher education, and both systems play essential roles in preparing and supporting students. The coordination gap is the space between those systems: the institutional handoffs where responsibility shifts from one organization to another. Each institution owns its part of the work, but no single institution owns the transitions between them.

Consider a senior who meets the Texas Success Initiative standard in the spring. District staff help the student prepare, apply to El Paso Community College, complete financial aid requirements, and select a program of study aligned with a high-demand regional career. At EPCC, responsibility shifts to college personnel, who support registration and persistence, verify that coursework is coded correctly for high-demand field funding, and report completed credentials. Without clear ownership of the handoff between these responsibilities, a fully prepared student can fall off the pathway over the summer, causing both institutions to lose the outcome and the funding tied to it.

Closing the coordination gap requires dedicated staff, shared data, and common routines across institutional boundaries. Yet the state's funding models reward the outcomes of coordination without funding the infrastructure required to produce them. Neither school districts nor the college possess sufficient discretionary resources to create that infrastructure independently. As a result, the work required to connect the two systems remains largely unfunded — even though it is essential to achieving the student outcomes Texas rewards.

DRIVING REGIONAL GROWTH THROUGH POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Completing meaningful college coursework or earning a credential before high school graduation changes both a student's trajectory and the region's economic capacity. A 2026 Texas Tech University study that followed nearly one million Texas students across eight graduating classes found that students who completed dual credit or earned a credential in high school later earned 15 to 20 percent more than peers who graduated without college readiness. They were also significantly more likely to complete a college degree.

For students, early postsecondary success expands educational, career, and earning potential. For El Paso, each additional credentialed graduate strengthens the local talent pool, helps employers fill high-demand positions, and increases the likelihood that talent developed in the region can build a career here. **At scale, student success becomes regional economic development.**

Source: Kirksey, J., et al. (2026). The Uneven Promise of Readiness. Texas Tech University. Retrieved from ttu-ir.tdl.org



INCREASING OUTCOMES AND SECURING MORE FUNDING

The coordination gap carries a measurable financial cost: substantial state funding remains unclaimed. In fiscal year 2024, Texas school districts accessed only 16% of the HB3 outcomes bonus funding available to them.

The opportunity is especially significant in El Paso. Of the \$51.4 million available to regional districts for the Class of 2024, only \$7.1 million — 14% — was accessed, leaving \$44.3 million unclaimed.



Source: Commit Partnership (2025). CCMR OBF Drawdowns Dashboard — ESC Region 19, Class of 2024. Maximum potential funding: \$51.4M; total accessed: \$7.1M; unclaimed: \$44.3M. Retrieved from commitpartnership.org

The \$44.3 million still within reach represents more than a budget opportunity. It reflects the scale of student outcomes — and the associated state investment — the region has not yet fully realized. Capturing more of this funding can provide districts with additional resources to strengthen advising, pathway development, and transition supports for future students.

One reason this funding remains out of reach is that the coordination connecting district preparation to college enrollment and credential completion does not yet exist systemically across the region.

WORKING TOGETHER AS A REGION

In 2025, CREEED commissioned a regional landscape analysis to answer a central question: How can stronger coordination between El Paso school districts and El Paso Community College help more students complete postsecondary credentials in high-demand fields while enabling both systems to access the HB3 and HB8 funding tied to those outcomes? Anthony, Canutillo, Socorro, and Ysleta

Independent School Districts, together with El Paso Community College, served as partners in the landscape analysis, contributing interviews, institutional data, and operational insights that grounded the findings in real district and college experience.

The four districts brought considerable assets to the inquiry: strong career and technical education programs, students earning credentials each year, and administrators willing to work across institutional boundaries. El Paso Community College contributed complementary strengths through its established dual credit partnerships, broad portfolio of workforce programs, and capacity to expand credential pathways aligned with regional demand. Together, the partners described a region experiencing economic growth, welcoming new industries, and increasingly focused on preparing students for high-wage, high-demand careers.

USING RESEARCH TO GUIDE EFFORTS

Across the participating institutions, the analysis reached the same conclusion: strong student preparation and career and technical education programs were already in place, but the coordination needed to convert that preparation into college enrollment and completed credentials was not. The infrastructure connecting K-12 and higher education lacked clear ownership, dedicated funding, and shared data. From this conclusion emerged seven findings and eleven recommendations.

SEVEN FINDINGS

- 1 **Significant funding opportunities remain untapped.**
- 2 **Strong career and technical education infrastructure and programs already exists.**
- 3 **EPCC's high-demand fields coverage and course coding limit HB3 and HB8 funding capture.**
- 4 **Gaps in the postsecondary transition exist across all pilot districts.**
- 5 **Fewer than one percent of students earn Level I or Level II certificates in the pilot districts.**
- 6 **Business engagement infrastructure is ready for expansion.**
- 7 **Districts have limited working knowledge of how to access HB3 outcomes bonus funding and HB8 high-demand fields.**

ELEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhanced college transition coaching and enrollment management
2. Level I and Level II certificate pathway development
3. Texas Success Initiative acceleration network
4. EPCC CIP code realignment
5. Fifteen-credit-hour threshold optimization
6. Business engagement network enhancement
7. Summer bridge programming enhancement
8. HB3 outcomes bonus professional development
9. Regional data review convenings and student tracking
10. Individual funding capture plans
11. Expanded regional reach

FOSTERING ALIGNMENT: THE ASCEND PARTNERSHIP

Ascend is the regional implementation partnership created to carry out the recommendations of the landscape analysis. It brings Anthony, Canutillo, Socorro, and Ysleta ISDs together with El Paso Community College, CREEED, employers, and philanthropic partners to strengthen the institutional handoffs that move students from high school preparation into postsecondary credentials of value and high-demand regional careers.

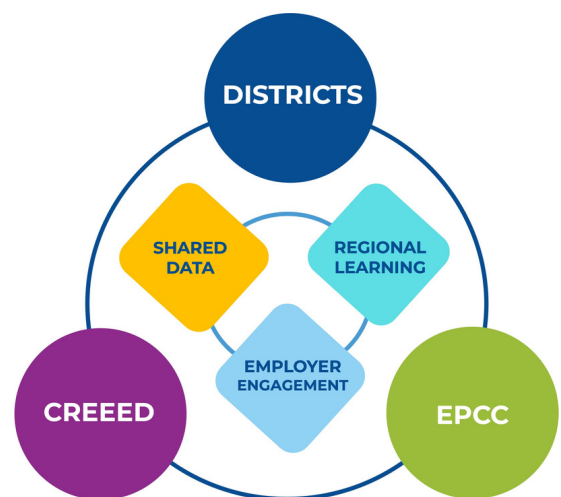
CREEED has committed to raising and providing the investments needed to fund the people, systems, and shared practices needed to put those recommendations into practice. Ascend does not introduce a new agenda; it helps El Paso implement the state's existing talent strategy by connecting students to the credentials and careers needed by the regional economy.

IMPLEMENTING A PARTNERSHIP MODEL

Ascend includes six interconnected components, bringing together three institutional anchors and three shared regional functions as one coordinated system. The districts, El Paso Community College, and CREEED each contribute distinct capacity, while shared accountability, regional learning, and employer engagement connect their work across institutional boundaries. Together, the six components address the points where student progress from high school preparation to credential completion can otherwise stall.

Three institutional anchors: Districts, EPCC, CREEED

Three shared functions: Shared data, Regional learning, Employer engagement



District implementation — secondary pathways

The four districts provide strong career and technical education programs, dedicated staff, and direct relationships with students and families. Each district establishes an implementation team that includes district leadership, career and technical education leaders, counselors, campus staff, and a dedicated CCMR Transition Coach. The coach serves as the team's day-to-day coordinator, monitoring student progress, coordinating district supports, and working with EPCC personnel to manage the shared transition from high school preparation through college enrollment and census day.

El Paso Community College — postsecondary hub

EPCC serves as the partnership's postsecondary hub, working with district implementation teams to create clear Level I and Level II certificate pathways aligned with district programs and high-demand regional careers. The college shares responsibility for the student transition, supporting students from application and enrollment through persistence and credential completion. A dedicated EPCC coordinator organizes this work across the college, connects the offices responsible for pathway development and student support, and serves as the primary point of connection with the district implementation teams.

CREED — regional backbone

CREED serves as the partnership's connector across institutions, fiscal agent, lead investor, and regional convener. Through the project lead, CREED connects the district implementation teams with EPCC, supports cross-institutional planning and shared learning, maintains the regional infrastructure for data and implementation, helps partners coordinate and extend employer engagement, and sustains work that individual institutions cannot fund independently.

Shared data — data-driven collaboration

A shared data framework, developed with the districts and EPCC and maintained by the project lead, gives partners a common view of student progress across institutional boundaries. Through monthly reviews, district teams, college personnel, and CREED identify where students are encountering barriers, determine what action is needed, and adjust strategies before critical milestones are missed.

Regional learning — quarterly convenings and professional development

Quarterly stakeholder convenings and six regional professional development sessions over thirty-six months bring district coaches, college personnel, and district leaders together around shared data, barrier removal, and strategy alignment. These sessions generate cross-district learning that no single district could produce alone.

Employer engagement — aligning pathways with employers

Ascend supports the existing employer relationships developed by the districts and EPCC. Across the region's high-demand fields, employers help shape pathways, validate industry skills, expand internships and work-based learning, and connect students to regional careers. By linking these efforts around shared priorities, Ascend helps partners extend successful practices and build new employer relationships to strengthen the Borderplex talent pipeline.



TRACKING PROGRESS

Ascend tracks five indicators that show whether students are progressing from high school preparation through key postsecondary milestones and toward credentials aligned with high-demand regional careers — and whether districts and EPCC are earning the associated state funding. District implementation teams, with day-to-day coordination from the CCMR Transition Coaches, monitor progress on the district side. The EPCC coordinator confirms enrollment, persistence, program coding, credential completion, and, where applicable, high-demand field alignment on the college side. Together, the partners identify where action is needed before a student outcome is lost.

FIVE INDICATORS OF PROGRESS

- 1 Texas Success Initiative readiness.**
Supports College Ready and Career Ready outcomes under HB3.
- 2 Completion of 15 or more dual credit hours.**
Generates HB8 performance funding for El Paso Community College.
- 3 Attainment of an industry-based certification.**
Contributes to Career Ready outcomes when paired with the applicable HB3 requirements.
- 4 Enrollment through census day.**
Helps satisfy the immediate-enrollment requirement for HB3 College Ready funding.
- 5 Completion of Level I or Level II certificates in high-demand fields.**
Tracked jointly with EPCC, these credentials represent Ascend's largest opportunity to produce aligned HB3 and HB8 outcomes and associated funding across both systems.

IMPLEMENTING AND PROGRESSING OVER TIME

Ascend follows a three-year progression designed to build, refine, and sustain the system.

2026 – 2027
BUILD

Partners finalize implementation plans, onboard coaches, establish the data systems, and begin pathway mapping with the college.

2027 – 2028
REFINE

Partners use first-year data to refine student-transition strategies, strengthen and expand Level I and Level II certificate pathways aligned with high-demand regional careers, and improve student outcomes and associated HB3 and HB8 funding through cross-district learning and closer alignment with EPCC.

2028 – 2029
SUSTAIN

Districts embed the staffing, routines, and data practices developed through Ascend into their ongoing operations. Each district finalizes its implementation playbook with support from CREEED and applies the lessons generated through the regional partnership. By June 2029, each district is positioned to sustain the work through its own personnel, established practices, and the additional revenue stronger student outcomes can generate.

DELIVERING SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

Across thirty-six months, Ascend produces shared tools, systems, and implementation resources that strengthen coordination between districts and EPCC. Several are already complete or underway.

REGIONAL COORDINATION INFRASTRUCTURE	
A shared data framework and dashboard	In progress
Six regional professional learning sessions	In progress
Quarterly stakeholder convenings	In progress
DISTRICT-COLLEGE TRANSITION AND PATHWAYS TOOLS	
Four individualized district implementation plans	Complete
Level I and Level II certificate pathway maps aligned with district programs and high- demand regional careers	In progress

DISTRICT-COLLEGE TRANSITION AND PATHWAYS TOOLS - CONTINUED

Documented district-EPCC transition processes incorporated into the implementation plans and playbooks

In progress

Review and realignment of eligible program coding and credential reporting for HB8 funding

In progress

SUSTAINABILITY TOOLS

Four district-owned implementation playbooks, developed with CREEED support and incorporating key EPCC connection points

At close

**INVESTING IN OUR REGION'S STUDENTS & ECONOMIC FUTURE**

CREEED has committed to securing and providing more than \$1 million over thirty-six months to launch Ascend and build the regional infrastructure required to connect district and college efforts. As lead funder and fiscal agent, CREEED's investment supports district coach grants, regional program leadership, shared data systems, professional learning, and the implementation resources needed to coordinate work across institutional boundaries.

The districts co-invest beginning in year one, contributing the majority of coach compensation and fully funding the position after year three. El Paso Community College contributes the coordinator role and additional in-kind support. This shared investment model gradually embeds responsibility within the participating institutions while stronger student outcomes increase their opportunity to access HB3 and HB8 funding.

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

CREEED gratefully acknowledges the GECU Foundation and Trellis Foundation for your investment in the Ascend program. We welcome additional philanthropic partners committed to extending the partnership's reach and impact.

BUILDING A TALENT STRONG EL PASO

El Paso's economic future depends on whether students can move successfully from preparation to postsecondary credentials of value — and from those credentials into high-demand regional careers that support economic mobility. Doing so requires school districts, El Paso Community College, employers, philanthropic partners, and CREEED to operate as one connected regional system. Texas has committed to becoming a Talent Strong state. Ascend gives El Paso the opportunity to show what that vision looks like in practice — here in El Paso.

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To learn more about the Ascend program or other CREEED initiatives, email info@creeed.org or go to creeed.org to sign up for our newsletter and events.