

### Community Leaders,

At Aligned, we believe Kansas thrives when education and workforce systems work together. In 2025, we launched the Cradle to Career Listening Tour with a clear purpose: to hear directly from Kansans about what is working, what is not, and where we should focus our efforts to strengthen the education to workforce pipeline.

Over the course of 4 months, we traveled more than 1,000 miles, engaged with over 100 Kansans, and surfaced more than 160 ideas. Parents, teachers, employers, and community leaders raised many of the same concerns across regions including childcare affordability, teacher shortages, rising college costs, and workforce readiness. Just as importantly, they pointed us toward solutions such as expanding apprenticeships, supporting educators, updating the school funding system, and creating clearer pathways from classroom to career.

Why this is important. This tour was not just about collecting feedback; it was about making sure Kansans' voices shape the work ahead. The insights gathered will directly inform Aligned's 2026 legislative priorities, guide our partnerships with schools and employers, and help us focus on solutions that are both practical and widely supported. In short, the Listening Tour created a roadmap for action.

This report summarizes what we heard, organizes ideas into key themes, and highlights where Kansans are most aligned. It is both a reflection of the communities we serve and a guide for policymakers, partners, and stakeholders who want to act on these shared priorities.

We are grateful to every parent, educator, employer, and community leader who contributed to this effort. Your voices are shaping the path forward and together we can build a stronger cradle to career pipeline for Kansas.

### Sincerely,

Torree Pederson President/CEO







# KANSAS CRADLE TO CAREER LISTENING TOUR 2025

### **Overview**

In 2025, Aligned launched the Kansas Cradle to Career Listening Tour to hear directly from educators, business leaders, parents, and community partners about the challenges and opportunities shaping our state's education and workforce pipeline. Over the course of three stops — Wichita, Kansas City, and Topeka — more than 100 participants shared their perspectives, generating 160 new ideas to strengthen early childhood, K–12, higher education, and workforce alignment.



## **Key Impact Metrics**



1,000+ Miles Traveled



100+ Kansans Engaged



160+ New Ideas



Informed our 2026 Legislative Priorities

# Why is this important

- 1. Parents, teachers, and employers are raising the same concerns across Kansas.
- 2. Clear themes help us move from 160 ideas to actionable solutions.
- 3. These insights show how childcare, K-12, higher ed, and workforce are all connected.
- 4. Stronger alignment across the pipeline means better use of time, talent, and resources.



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"The wide breadth of expertise in the room was important, in that it allowed for the understanding that at all levels, we're working to improve systems and community ... I was inspired that perhaps this group can find specific touchpoints that if resolved, will impact all areas represented in the room."

- Wichita Attendee



# KANSAS CRADLE TO CAREER LISTENING TOUR 2025

### Who we heard from

Our listening tour brought together over 100 Kansans from across 10 counties. Participants represented every stage of the cradle-to-career pipeline and reflected a wide range of perspectives:

#### **Community & Nonprofit Leaders – 37%**

 Youth-serving organizations, advocacy groups, and nonprofits supporting literacy and career readiness

#### **Business & Workforce - 21%**

 Chamber of Commerce leaders, employers, and workforce development organizations

#### Educators - 21%

 Classroom teachers, school board members, district leaders, and early childhood providers

#### Elected Officials & State Leaders - 14%

 City, county, and state officials; state education leaders; legislative staff

#### Parents & Families - 4%

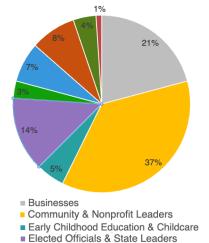
• Family advocates and community members engaged in early childhood, K–12, and higher education discussions

#### **Higher Education - 3%**

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 Faculty, administrators, and leaders from community colleges, technical schools, and universities

#### **Total Attendees by Category**



- Higher Education
- K-12Local School Board
- Parents
- Teachers

### **Statewide Themes**

# Childcare & Early Learning as a Workforce Issue:

High costs, limited availability of slots, and workforce shortages make childcare a barrier for families — it is both an educational and workforce issue.

#### **Teacher Pipeline & Educator Support:**

Shortages, burnout, and barriers to entry strain schools, creating strong interest in grow-your-own pipelines, apprenticeships, and retention strategies.

# College Affordability & Workforce Alignment:

Rising tuition, low completion rates, and misalignment with jobs highlight the need for affordable credentials, wraparound supports, and employer partnerships.

#### Workforce Readiness & Soft Skills:

Employers see persistent gaps in communication, professionalism, and preparedness, fueling calls for more apprenticeships, internships, and earlier career exploration.



While we received extensive feedback across all communities, the following captures the most common challenges and solutions raised in early childhood, K-12, higher education, and workforce.

# **Early Childhood Education and Childcare**

Challenges	Proposed Solutions
High costs / affordability	Expand public investment and subsidies so families can access affordable childcare and providers can keep doors open.
Families unaware of resources / lack of navigation	Develop navigator roles to help families identify, understand, and access available childcare and early learning resources.
Children not kindergarten- ready / lack of a clear readiness definition	Expand Pre-K and readiness programs and adopt a consistent statewide definition of kindergarten readiness to better align expectations.
Limited slots / long waitlists (esp. rural and nontraditional hours)	Support flexible slots and nontraditional hours so parents working evenings or in rural areas can find care.
Providers face unsustainable business models / high up-front costs	Promote childcare as an economic development priority, ensuring providers have resources to sustain operations and expand access.
Workforce shortages & low wages	Raise wages and provide supplements for childcare workers; fund scholarships and career pipelines to attract and retain educators.
Regulatory and licensing burdens	Simplify licensing and compliance processes to reduce red tape while maintaining safety and quality standards.
Quality of care concerns	Provide capacity and innovation grants to improve facilities, expand quality programs, and test new service models.
Lack of substitutes / backup staff	Fund scholarships and workforce pipelines to train floaters and substitutes who can step in when staff are absent.
Transportation barriers for families	Build stronger family engagement programs, including supports for transportation so children can reliably attend care.



## K-12 Education

Challenges	Proposed Solutions
Outdated / flawed funding formula	Update and fix the school funding formula to better reflect current costs and ensure resources are distributed fairly.
Phone and technology distractions	Create phone-free school environments to reduce classroom disruptions and support stronger student focus.
Disconnect between schools, families, and communities	Strengthen parent engagement programs and expand project-based/career-connected learning to rebuild trust and community ties.
Teacher shortages & burnout	Grow-your-own teacher pipelines and apprenticeships to build local talent; improve retention through alternative certification routes and better support for current teachers.
Student mental health and behavioral challenges	Expand school-based mental health supports to address rising student needs and reduce pressure on teachers.
Overreliance on standardized testing	Reduce emphasis on standardized tests and instead promote literacy interventions and stronger instructional strategies.
Rigid curriculum / graduation requirements	Expand project-based and career-connected learning to give students more flexible, real-world pathways to success.
Inequities between districts (resources, opportunities)	Update the funding formula and expand career-connected learning to help level the playing field between schools.
Parent disengagement / poor communication	Strengthen parent engagement programs to improve communication and build stronger school–family partnerships.
Facilities in disrepair / lack of investment	Invest in school facilities and expand tutoring/mentoring to improve both learning environments and academic outcomes.



# **Higher Education**

Challenges	Solutions Proposed
Rising tuition / affordability challenges	Provide more affordable, short-term credentials and increase financial aid and wraparound supports so more students can access higher education without long-term debt.
Misalignment with labor market needs	Strengthen employer partnerships for upskilling and ensure students learn essential life and workplace skills that align with today's jobs.
Lack of short-term or flexible credential pathways	Provide affordable, short-term credentials and expand evening/online program options to meet the needs of working adults.
Low completion and persistence rates	Incentivize completion and persistence through targeted supports and increase aid/wraparound services to help students stay on track.
Transfer barriers between institutions	Improve credit transfer pathways to make it easier for students to move between institutions without losing progress.
Gaps in wraparound services and supports	Increase financial aid and wraparound supports (childcare, advising, transportation, food/housing) to address non-academic barriers.
Weak employer–higher ed partnerships	Strengthen partnerships for upskilling and expand apprenticeships, internships, and certification programs tied directly to workforce needs.
Uneven quality across institutions	Promote alternative pathways beyond 4-year degrees and highlight proven models that deliver strong outcomes.
Staffing shortages in higher ed	Expand apprenticeships, internships, and certification programs to grow teaching capacity, and strengthen employer partnerships to support talent pipelines.
Limited collaboration between institutions	Increase cross-institution collaboration to share resources, improve efficiency, and create smoother student pathways.



### Workforce

Challenges	Solutions Proposed
Soft skill gaps (communication, professionalism, work ethic)	Expand apprenticeships and paid work-based learning to build real-world skills, and provide leadership development opportunities.
Brain drain (graduates leaving the state)	Expand apprenticeships and paid work-based learning, and create earlier career exploration to keep students engaged locally.
Lack of centralized workforce resources / employer engagement	Create centralized workforce hubs/access points to connect job seekers, training programs, and employers in one place.
Skills mismatch between workers and jobs	Strengthen school-to-work and employer partnerships, and provide professional development for workers to adapt to automation, IT, and other evolving skills.
Lack of career awareness and exploration	Create earlier career exploration starting in middle school and market trades/alternative pathways to show students more options.
Transportation barriers (esp. rural areas)	Expand transit and childcare supports to ensure workers can reach jobs and training programs.
Low wages / limited benefits	Conduct cost-of-living studies and align wages to make jobs more competitive and sustainable.
Employers struggling to attract/retain talent	Provide leadership development opportunities and market trades/alternative pathways to strengthen the talent pipeline.
Smaller employers can't support internships/apprenticeships	Support small-business internship programs with resources to help them participate in training.
Childcare barriers for working parents	Expand childcare and transit supports so parents can reliably work and train.