

ElevateEdAZ

How a Chamber of Commerce is Bridging Education and Industry

How do we bridge the gap between what classrooms teach and what employers are desperate to hire for?



That's the question leaders at the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation are grappling with amid Arizona's rapid economic transformation. Today, more jobs than ever require postsecondary credentials and meaningful work experience. Yet, fewer than half of Arizona high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education, and too few students are completing career technical education (CTE) programs aligned with high-wage, high-demand fields to meet the state's hiring needs. The result is a widening gap between the talent employers need and the workforce pipeline Arizona is producing.

To help address these challenges, the Foundation leveraged its role as an economic development engine

to create ElevateEdAZ, a pioneering initiative designed to prepare Arizona students, regardless of background or zip code, for college and career by aligning high school with workforce demand. The economic challenge in Phoenix, where youth unemployment is nearly triple the state average, was particularly acute. Arizona has led the nation in advanced manufacturing growth, yet when the Foundation launched ElevateEdAZ in 2020, the region's high schools offered only one manufacturing pathway serving 24 students. Meanwhile, Arizona forecasted 60,000 new jobs in the semiconductor space alone. Employers were struggling to fill skilled positions and were largely looking to import labor from elsewhere in the nation.

ElevateEdAZ

Shapes and supports career technical education in **21 high schools** with a combined 65% low-income student population

Enabled **494 students** to participate in internships in 2026

Increased dual enrollment **15%** in 2024, reaching over **7,000 enrollment counts** across its partner high schools



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Across the nation, careers that have long been reliable routes to the middle class are increasingly affected by automation. Amid an economy rapidly transformed by artificial intelligence, communities have been compelled to systematically rethink the role high schools play in building career readiness and opening the door to meaningful credentials. Increasingly, chambers of commerce are assuming a greater leadership role as intermediaries uniquely positioned to bridge high school, college, and employment. In a 2023 survey by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives, chambers rated their engagement in workforce initiatives an 8.3 out of 10, underscoring the importance of that role.

In Phoenix, leaders intentionally invested in ElevateEdAZ in direct alignment with the Chamber's purpose of supporting businesses and developing a stronger workforce. This brief illustrates how ElevateEdAZ is leading the expansion of high-quality pathways across Arizona with a multifaceted approach:

- ➔ Authentic, sustained employer partnerships and strengthening relationships between employers, schools, and college partners
- ➔ Data-driven, industry-responsive pathways that integrate CTE and dual enrollment at the classroom level
- ➔ Multi-district collaboration and a boots on the ground approach to college and career coaching in high schools
- ➔ State-level advocacy to create the enabling conditions of funding, teacher incentives, flexible seat time policy, and more

This work has not been easy. Persistent challenges include:

- ➔ Sustaining a philanthropy-driven model
- ➔ Advocating for public financing amid diminished state funding and incentives
- ➔ Streamlining dual enrollment registration and payment for students and schools
- ➔ Working to ensure that enabling policy actually gets implemented
- ➔ Scaling transportation for work-based learning

Yet, as ElevateEdAZ continues to implement and evolve its model, its story offers powerful insights for other chambers looking to grow their role as career pathways intermediaries.

Since 2022, ElevateEdAZ has partnered with Education Strategy Group in Accelerate ED, a Gates Foundation initiative from 2022-2026, to build the capacity of regional and state intermediary organizations to put all students on accelerated pathways to degree and career. ElevateEdAZ came to the table with a compelling problem: Arizona was leading the nation in advanced manufacturing growth, yet the region's high schools at the time offered one manufacturing pathway serving 24 students while the state forecasted 60,000 new jobs in the semiconductor space alone. Together, ElevateEdAZ and ESG worked to:

- ➔ Engage in a 9-month Blueprint Design sprint for scaling accelerated pathways across the Greater Phoenix region
- ➔ Support an analysis of the region's high-value credentials to inform which CTE offerings and pathways can create greater economic mobility for Greater Phoenix youth
- ➔ Design and host a learning visit for peers around the country to see the ElevateEdAZ model and systems change approach in action
- ➔ Develop a case study of ElevateEdAZ's partnership with Mayo Clinic of Arizona and the employer case for investing in high school internships
- ➔ Facilitate deep, sustained cross-site learning between ElevateEdAZ and other pathway intermediaries in different states and contexts



ElevateEdAZ Student Job Shadow, Construction Industry

Authentic Employer Partnerships

Chambers of commerce represent a powerful resource for bringing employers to the table to inform pathway selection and design and create broader access to work-based learning experiences such as internships, job shadows, and mock interviews that prepare students for success in the modern workforce. Both ElevateEdAZ and its partner employers stress the importance of authentic partnerships rather than transactional engagement. That means a shared commitment to investing in the high school population as the region's future workforce and expanding both their skills and social capital.



Connect to Work AZ at Job Fair

“One of our key tenets is you’re coming in to discover if you like what you’re studying right now,” said Kaylee Winslow, Product Manager at Axon, who leads Axon’s internship program and its partnership with ElevateEdAZ. “They’re added to the team Slack, they go through orientation, we make them feel like an equal contributor, and we hold them accountable. They are operating heavy machinery and setting up meetings with senior engineers.”

ElevateEdAZ’s Business Advisory Council brings industry partners together with teachers and administrators to provide employer support and guidance for 14 CTE programs across the region. Its business partnership team cultivates employer relationships, mitigates employer barriers to offering internships, and serves as the first point of contact should intern issues arise.

To better connect high school CTE educators with industry professionals and the evolving needs and realities of their field, ElevateEdAZ also hosts educator externships. In 2025-26, ElevateEdAZ offered eight in-person educator externships that connected 101

educators with seven different business partners. Each of the eight externships were industry-specific, half-day experiences that included tours, employer panels, networking, and interactive simulations. The externships provide up-to-date insight into industry practices, resources for students, and career pathway information, while facilitating educator reflection about how to incorporate the insights into their classroom curriculum.

Boots on the Ground in Schools

ElevateEdAZ has made an unusual commitment for a chamber—it has embedded a college and career coach in 21 high schools, who work directly with students, teachers, and families to increase participation in high-wage, high-demand career pathways. Coaches help develop and evolve students’ postsecondary plans, enroll them in college courses, coach them on workplace readiness, match work-based learning opportunities to students’ career interests and skills, and support them with scheduling, transportation, and ongoing coaching to complete and succeed in internships. Employers know that when they work with ElevateEdAZ, they aren’t just reaching one or a few high schools—they’re accessing students across 21 high schools who get professional skills training and have completed CTE coursework related to the employer’s internship opportunities.

“There’s an idea that CTE is not aligned with postsecondary education and this school shows that there is a world where both college and career integrate,” said Juliet Amara, CTE Director at Deer Valley Unified School District. “You’re not just working toward your career—you need to have postsecondary opportunities. This partnership enables us to focus on how we are maximizing our pathways to make sure they are aligned with both the needs of the region and student interest and need.”

Costs per school range from \$100,000 to \$150,000 per year, depending on the size of the school and number of available high-wage, high-demand CTE courses, credentials, and dual enrollment courses. Cost variance is primarily driven by student and teacher incentives for dual enrollment and credential attainment. ElevateEdAZ has sustained its coaching model primarily through philanthropic funds, in most cases employing coaches directly through ElevateEdAZ rather than partnering with the school district to leverage their employees. This decision comes with financial sustainability risks, but enables the coaches to focus exclusively on college and career coaching duties, take part in professional development, and support data analysis and centralized decision making across ElevateEdAZ’s multi-district network of school partners.

Embedded Dual Enrollment that Accelerates Degree Completion

Arizona students who take dual enrollment courses are more than twice as likely to attend college, with greatest benefits for Latino, male, low-income, and special education students, according to research from Helios Education Foundation, a major supporter of ElevateEdAZ. Working with its partner districts and Maricopa County Community Colleges to embed dual enrollment into CTE pathways is a cornerstone of ElevateEdAZ's work. By tying dual enrollment to workforce needs and demonstrating how courses lead to the credentials employers want, the Greater Phoenix Chamber successfully advocated for state appropriations in 2023 that helped drive an initial 40% increase in dual enrollment counts.

"Dual enrollment is serious to me, as it's saving my family money rather than spending thousands of dollars in college, and I'm getting the feeling of taking that college course," said a junior student at Barry Goldwater High School in Deer Valley.

The increase was achieved through a multi-pronged approach to student and family engagement, teacher incentives, intentional course alignment, removing registration barriers, and a policy agenda to garner state resources. But sustaining state investment in dual enrollment funding continues to be a key priority and ongoing challenge.

Driving the Enabling Conditions for Scale

As the Greater Phoenix Chamber Foundation drives the programmatic implementation of ElevateEdAZ, the Greater Phoenix Chamber leverages its member-driven

public policy role to advocate for the enabling conditions that make the work possible. These have included:

- ➔ Advocating for legislative appropriations to help students cover the cost of dual enrollment courses.
- ➔ Developing more flexible seat time requirements that better enable work-based learning and dual enrollment.

Meanwhile, ElevateEdAZ provides the following programmatic supports:

- ➔ Providing incentives to teachers to become certified to teach dual enrollment.
- ➔ Influencing career pathways offerings in local schools by providing incentive funding for students and teachers for Industry-Recognized Credentials in high-wage, high-demand fields based on labor-market data and recommendations from industry partners.
- ➔ Leading a statewide Dual Enrollment Coalition focused on increasing dual enrollment attainment across the state.

"We can impact policy that supports ElevateEdAZ on the policy front," noted Mike Huckins, Senior Vice President of Public Affairs and IT Operations at Greater Phoenix Chamber. Key tactics include a clear public policy agenda outlining the Chamber's workforce and education policies; a political action committee, endorsement process, and financial contributions that support political candidates clearly demonstrating a focus on pro-business workforce outcomes; and leveraging industry voices to tell their impact stories to legislators about how education-to-career pathways have helped their business.

ElevateEdAZ Educator Externship, Healthcare Industry



ElevateEdAZ's path to expansion leverages partnerships with other chambers across the state that can adapt the ElevateEdAZ model for their own regional context. In partnership with Green Valley Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center (GVSC), ElevateEdAZ is now working in two high schools in the Sahuarita Unified School District, and the district has refined its policies to support increased work-based learning. GVSC is leveraging its business relationships to ensure the program aligns with local industry needs, while ElevateEdAZ oversees on-campus college and career coaching. The pilot program aims to increase dual enrollment, industry-recognized credential attainment, and access to work-based learning—adapting the Greater Phoenix model for the unique needs of a new region.



Semiconductor Career Night sponsored by GitLab

Many different organization types are well positioned to play critical functions that bridge education and industry, like those of ElevateEdAZ.

In 2025, Strada Education Foundation, with support from Education Strategy Group, convened an action group of intermediary organization leaders, researchers, and policy experts to develop a Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries, defining critical intermediary functions that help employers design, implement, and scale work-based learning.

What Can Chambers Do?

The Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries identifies five core functions that help employers design, implement, and scale work-based learning. ElevateEdAZ demonstrates how a chamber can put these functions into practice using its trusted relationships with employers, schools, and policymakers to reduce the barriers

employers face and build stronger education-to-career pathways.

Chambers do not need to replicate the ElevateEdAZ model in full. Instead, they can assess where employers and education partners face the greatest gaps in their community and determine which intermediary functions they are best positioned to provide.

Employer engagement: Turn employer needs into pathway intelligence.

Chambers can use their trusted relationships with business leaders to understand employers' talent challenges, build support for work-based learning, and translate employer needs into actionable guidance for education and workforce partners. ElevateEdAZ's Business Advisory Council brings employers together with educators and administrators to inform CTE programs and pathway development, while its business partnership team sustains relationships and helps employers overcome barriers to offering work-based learning.

Solutions design: Help employers build talent solutions that work for both business and learners.

Chambers can help employers move from interest in work-based learning to well-designed experiences that address real talent needs. ElevateEdAZ serves as a single point of entry for employers seeking high school interns, giving businesses access to students across 21 high schools rather than requiring them to build relationships with individual schools. Its partnerships also help ensure that work-based learning opportunities connect to students' skills, interests, and preparation.

Solutions brokering: Bring the right employers and partners together to solve shared talent challenges.

Chambers can use their convening power to move employers from competing for talent to collectively building it, and connect businesses with the schools, colleges, workforce organizations, and other partners needed to act. In Phoenix, the Foundation convened a healthcare workforce collaborative that developed a statewide strategy to address the nursing shortage, including partnerships with community colleges to create two new specialty nursing programs.

Implementation support: Make it easier for employers to participate and stay engaged.

Chambers can provide the capacity employers often lack to launch and sustain work-based learning. ElevateEdAZ's college and career coaches prepare students for the workplace, match students to opportunities, and help address scheduling, transportation, and other barriers. This reduces the operational lift for employers while increasing the likelihood that students and businesses have a successful experience.

Administrative support: Reduce or remove the friction that keeps employers from participating.

Work-based learning can require employers to navigate multiple schools, student recruitment, scheduling, transportation, compliance, and other administrative processes. Chambers can serve as a central point of coordination, simplifying these processes and making participation feasible—particularly for small and midsize employers with limited capacity. ElevateEdAZ's centralized business partnership and school-based coaching infrastructure illustrates how an intermediary can absorb this complexity on employers' behalf.

Two Chamber Advantages That Can Help These Functions Succeed

Policy advocacy: Create the conditions for scale.

Chambers often have the unique ability to pair intermediary work with a member-driven policy agenda. The Greater Phoenix Chamber has advocated for funding,



ElevateEdAZ Student Job Shadow, Automotive Industry

incentives, and greater flexibility for dual enrollment and work-based learning, while ElevateEdAZ focuses on implementation. Chambers can amplify employers' voices with policymakers to make the case that stronger education-to-career pathways are not simply an education priority; they are a business and economic competitiveness imperative.

Public messaging: Make the business case for work-based learning.

Chambers can build broader employer participation by framing work-based learning around the outcomes businesses care about: developing a stronger local talent pipeline, reducing hiring and turnover challenges, and preparing future employees with relevant skills. Sharing employer stories, ROI, and concrete evidence of business impact can help turn individual employer successes into broader momentum for the region.

The opportunity for chambers is not to become schools or workforce agencies. It is to use their unique position in the business community to make it easier for employers to participate, for partners to work together, and to ensure that education-to-career pathways reflect real regional demand.



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Additional Resources

Read more about ElevateEdAZ's leadership in career pathways:

- ➔ [From High School to Hire: How Mayo Clinic is Investing in Internships as a Talent Pipeline Strategy \(ElevateEdAZ & Education Strategy Group\)](#)
- ➔ [Business Partner Work-Based Learning Guide \(ElevateEdAZ\)](#)
- ➔ [High-Quality Career Pathways Analysis \(ElevateEdAZ\)](#)
- ➔ [Fall 2024 Dual Enrollment Follow-Up Report \(ElevateEdAZ\)](#)
- ➔ [Why Schools Should Leverage Their Local Chamber of Commerce: Building Economic Opportunity Through Career Pathways \(Getting Smart\)](#)



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