

ALIGNING OPPORTUNITIES

IN THE NORTHEAST OHIO REGION

A resource to aid in addressing the demand and supply imbalance in the region's workforce.

Aligning Next-Gen Talent:

Preparing Today for Tomorrow's Opportunities



With generous support from:





A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO

MATT DOLAN

EARLY EXPOSURE MATTERS – STUDENTS CAN ONLY ASPIRE TO WHAT THEY’VE SEEN AND EXPERIENCED.

In the 9th edition of *Aligning Opportunities* report, we explore the importance of young people gaining earlier exposure to career pathways through work-based learning experiences to help them understand how their interests connect to in-demand careers.

Through focus groups with local employers, we heard a clear and consistent message: while technical ability matters, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, reliability, and problem-solving are just as essential. Developing these skills—and instilling curiosity about work and purpose at a younger age—will help strengthen the talent pipeline for decades to come.

By aligning education, business, and community partners around early engagement and foundational skill-building, we can prepare today’s students to become tomorrow’s innovators, creators, and leaders. Together, we can ensure Northeast Ohio continues to grow talent that drives our region’s prosperity and resilience.

Sincerely,

Matt Dolan
Chief Executive Officer
Team NEO





A MESSAGE FROM DELTA DENTAL OF OHIO

NORTHEAST OHIO IS A VIBRANT REGION WITH TREMENDOUS POTENTIAL FOR **GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY.**

As we look to the future, it's clear that our ability to thrive depends on preparing the next generation for success in a rapidly changing world.

Delta Dental is proud to once again sponsor Team NEO's Annual *Aligning Opportunities* report, now in its ninth edition. The 2025 report pivots from analyzing the adult workforce to focusing on K-12 students and young working graduates in Northeast Ohio. This shift reflects changing postsecondary enrollment trends, evolving student attitudes toward education and work, and the ongoing business demand for skilled talent.

This year's report emphasizes the importance of expanding student career exploration and increasing awareness of local job opportunities while highlighting internships, mentorship, flexible scheduling and community involvement as solutions to employer pain points.

At Delta Dental, we are committed to supporting the health and vitality of our members—your employees, friends, and family. We believe that by investing in the next generation and aligning our programs with the needs of our communities, we can help Northeast Ohio reach its full potential.

Thank you, Team NEO, for your leadership and partnership in this important work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Loeffler".

Michael Loeffler D
Director, Sales and Account Management
Delta Dental of Ohio

INTRODUCTION



BUILDING A STRONG TALENT PIPELINE IS CRITICAL TO SUSTAINING ECONOMIC GROWTH.

Preparing young people with work-based learning experiences and skills before they enter college or the workforce gives them a head start in understanding career pathways, building confidence, and developing in-demand competencies. Early exposure to jobs, whether through internships, apprenticeships, or project-based learning, ensures students graduate with both academic knowledge and real-world experience.

This strategy has the potential to both help employers fill their open positions and equip our region's future workforce to thrive in a rapidly changing economy. Previous editions of *Aligning Opportunities* highlighted data on the people who make up Northeast Ohio's working economy, from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, to working moms and veterans.

This year, we'll focus on the population making up talent pipelines: K-12 students. Since data can be limited on this population for good reason, this report will feature available data at the high school level, working population under the age of 24, and other information relevant to young people working in our economy. Why the additional focus?



Since COVID, the national conversation on postsecondary education's return on investment has changed the way young people view their working and education careers.



Enrollment trends are changing alongside student appetites.



Business demand for a variety of skilled talent remains strong.

One strategy emerging from this complicated landscape is to expand student career exploration and raise awareness of local job opportunities. Products like [YouScience](#) help school districts match student aptitude and interest to career pathways.

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce funds Educational Service Centers, State Support Teams, and Information Technology Centers in the state play unique roles in supporting school districts, students with special needs, and other innovations in statewide education. Currently, there are over 20 such organizations across Northeast Ohio's 14-county footprint.¹

This strategy isn't a panacea for business talent challenges. However, intermediaries, like Medina County Economic Development Corporation, Greater Cleveland Career Consortium, Stark Education Partnership and ESC of Lorain County, work to bridge this gap between student's education and employment and in some cases offer specific talent solutions. This report also features findings from four focus groups facilitated by these education intermediaries and Team NEO staff, bringing employers together to discuss talent challenges, employer-led solutions, and why engaging with middle and high schoolers makes sense for them.



Source: Student learning to program a robot at MAGNET

FAST FACTS



644,156

Northeast Ohio population under 19 in 2024.



40%

The labor force participation rate for recent high school dropouts in 2024².



156

Number of school districts in Northeast Ohio.



50K

OH homeschool students in 2024, a 60% increase since 2020³. Post-COVID trend.



63%

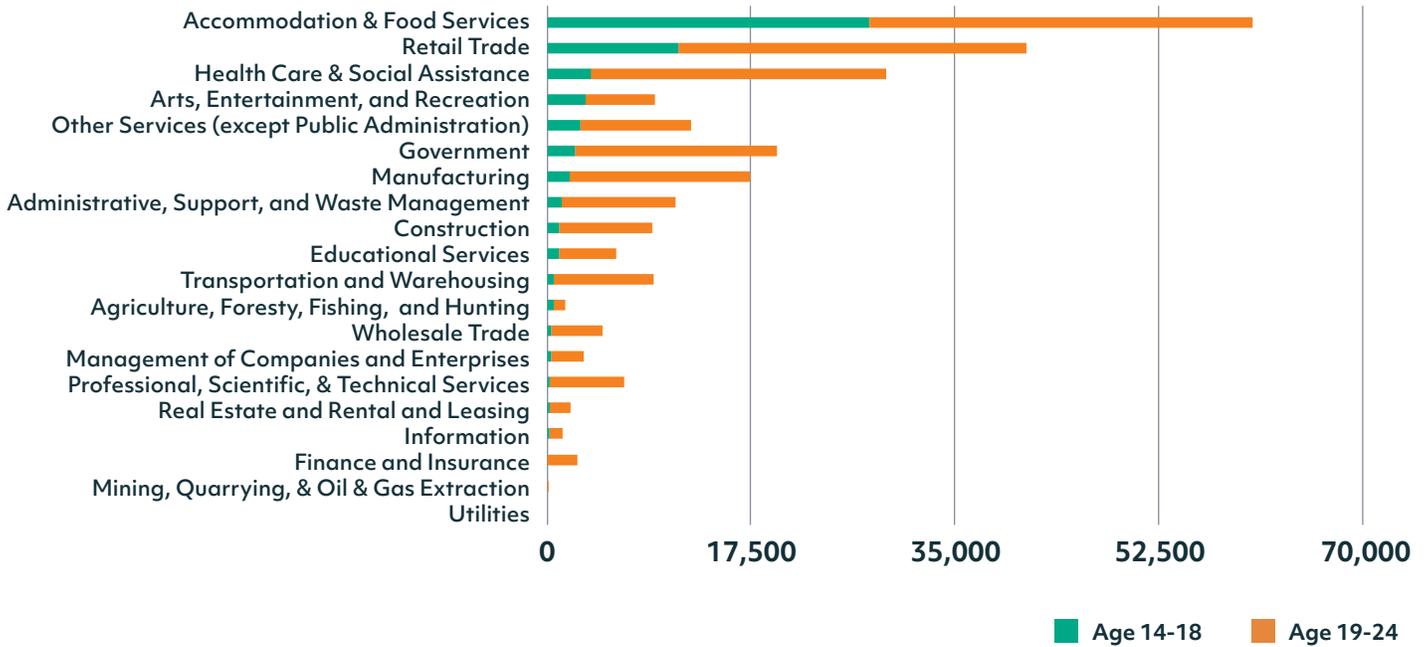
The percentage of high school graduates enrolled in colleges or universities in 2024.

¹ *Educational regional Service System from the ESC Association.*

² *College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates 2024". Bureau of Labor Statistics. April 22, 2025.*

³ *2025 Ohio Education by the Numbers*

2024 YOUNG WORKERS



YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TYPICALLY INFLUENCED BY FAMILY, FRIENDS, OTHERS IN THEIR GENERATION, OLDER STUDENTS, AND MANY OTHER FACTORS WHEN CONSIDERING CAREERS.

Social media’s role in how Gen Z finds employment also can’t be ignored.⁴ The jobs that young people have when they first join the labor force also shape career trajectories, or in some cases, are a detour to an entirely different career. Younger students see the pathways taken by older students and are influenced not only by the most visible careers but also by the accessibility of those roles within their communities. The below are statistics that help orient us to some of these realities and the choices young people make at the start of their career:

- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 66% of high school graduates who opt out of college choose to join the labor force, compared to 41% of high school graduates enrolled in post-secondary education.⁵

- In 2024, the highest rates of workers under the age of 18 in Northeast Ohio were in Accommodation, Food Services, Retail, Health Care, the Arts, and Government, noted in dark blue in the chart above. Industries like Utilities, Mining, and Finance and Insurance employ the lowest rates of 14–18-year-olds, while Information, Real Estate, and Professional Services see a few hundred employees in the age range.
- Some of these industries, like Mining, are legally out of reach for young people while roles in Finance and Insurance may be lower due to the sensitive information they handle.
- For post-high school workers between ages 19 and 24, noted in orange above, Manufacturing is one of the top five industries, with over 15,000 young workers in Northeast Ohio this past year.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is also complicating the picture for young jobseekers who are learning that fields most exposed to AI are hiring less entry-level talent. The two jobs most affected by this 2025 trend include software developers and customer service representatives, who typically work across industries.⁶

⁴ Lichtenberg, Nick. "First-of-its-kind Stanford study says AI is starting to have a 'significant and disproportionate impact' on entry-level workers in the U.S." *Fortune*. August 26, 2025.

⁵ "College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary. *Economic News Release*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 22, 2025.

⁶ Lichtenberg, Nick. "First-of-its-kind Stanford study says AI is starting to have a 'significant and disproportionate impact' on entry-level workers in the U.S." *Fortune*. August 26, 2025.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Team NEO coordinated four focus groups, each led by an educational intermediary whose role is to expand career awareness for students, connect businesses with schools to increase exposure, or otherwise facilitates connections between private employers and Ohio's education system. These intermediaries act as a much-needed entry-point for businesses and school districts, and in some cases provide special services.

To learn more about these findings or get connected to an intermediary, contact Team NEO Director of Talent, Julie Szeltner



JULIE SZELTNER

jszeltner@teamneo.org



GREATER CLEVELAND CAREER CONSORTIUM

FOCUS GROUP

PARTICIPANTS:



FEDERAL RESERVE BANK
of CLEVELAND



EMPLOYER PAIN POINTS:

Onboarding new hires (esp. soft skills, professional dress codes), generational gaps between existing and new staff, and lack of sales skills or training were central to these employers. The group echoed that young people typically weren't aware of the specialized careers or available positions at their agencies. Developing and maintaining internships has been costly, and it's complicated by student interns who require permission slips, transportation, and other school-related logistics. Often, schools will ask private employers or professionals to engage with their students but are unaware of the lead time required to fit these engagements into a professional's schedule.

IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS:

Employers used interesting methods to address these pain points: some allowed partners to use meeting space to increase community visibility, others hosted happy hours for local educators, and some participated in senior high school/college capstone projects. For interns, they focused the first week on soft skill development. Solutions that bypassed transportation barriers for employees, interns, or students were prioritized. They used LinkedIn and AI to stay engaged with program participants afterwards.

STARK EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

FOCUS GROUP

PARTICIPANTS:



EMPLOYER PAIN POINTS:

This group experienced many of the pain points of the GCCC group, with some unique challenges. High rates of retiring staff and low rates of young jobseekers (who typically help offset insurance cost for older workers) intensifies high insurance costs for employers. Many commented that young people aren't aware, and sometimes uninterested, in their job openings, but that hiring restrictions for under 18-year-olds plays a role.

IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS:

Employers focused on providing job training and mentorship programs to address generational gaps, in some cases allowing for part-time mentoring roles to be created that developed communication and attendance habits in new hires. Sign-on bonuses and referral systems helped find new/keep existing talent, but did not work for all. Some management established guidelines and special timeslots for working students under 18 so they could find a spot in the production process within labor law guidelines, collaborating with high school guidance counselors to keep things up to par. In one case, an employer started a shop floor safety committee which gave young workers a chance to engage and feel part of the company.

MEDINA FOCUS GROUP

FOCUS GROUP

PARTICIPANTS:



EMPLOYER PAIN POINTS:

Employers echoed their biggest barrier to finding and retaining talent was both access to transportation and long-term retention. There are currently no incentives to help bridge the gap between population centers and their current job openings at the levels needed to address this challenge. Students are also not always given the same time off to visit businesses as they are to spend time attending college campuses or post-secondary assemblies. These businesses are competing against fast food chains and restaurants offering lower or similar wages. In the healthcare sector specifically, retaining entry through senior level talent is a huge challenge in the first 18 months of an employee's tenure.

IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS:

One existing transit solution in Medina County offers residents scheduled service on demand for an affordable fare, but run time rarely matches work schedules of employees. Employers use business coaches to address employee churn, or might offer to pay for a school district's bussing to showcase operations to students. Human resource training on day one has helped some emphasize grace as a response to cultural differences and conflict in the workplace. Some use automation tax credits to fill openings. Tuition reimbursement, referral bonuses and other sign on incentives over \$2,000 are also being used by these employers. MCEDC's Career Coach specifically helps connect county businesses to schools, internships, and more, and has been heavily utilized by Medina employers and school district counselors to keep things up to par. In one case, an employer started a shop floor safety committee which gave young workers a chance to engage and feel part of the company.

LORAIN FOCUS GROUP

FOCUS GROUP

PARTICIPANTS:



EMPLOYER PAIN POINTS:

Retention and barriers to transportation were identified as the biggest barriers to growth. For those looking to engage with students, employers and school districts have limited capacity to co-facilitate work-based learning experiences, and not all who want to participate have the capacity to file approval with the state to do so. In the short-term, headhunters are increasing the cost of sourcing some mid- and senior- level talent. In the long run, high cost, high-deductible insurance plans are hurting employer competitiveness. Addressing the childcare challenge also seems impossible from a small- and medium-sized employer perspective.

IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS:

In one case, an employer participated with United Way in a pilot grant project to provide affordable rides to workers within a given area. While successful, funding ended, and the project could not be continued. Employers noted, however, that working with the ESC of Lorain County, or directly with a joint vocational school (JVS), allowed them to focus on long-term retention and get plugged into various school districts to participate in career, college, and skilled trades career expos that showcase their business to the next generation. To solve other retention problems, employers reward perfect attendance with an additional PTO day, mark birthdays as holidays for employees, or schedule follow up conversations to understand employee absences.

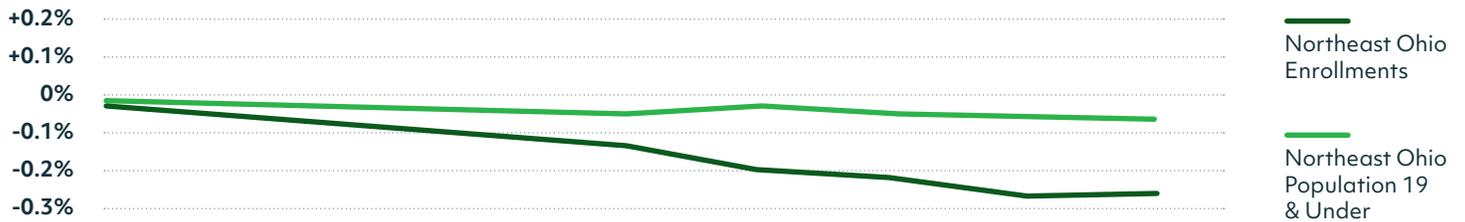
BUSINESS AND EDUCATION LEADERS ARE BOTH CHANGING THE WAY THEY ENGAGE WITH TALENT PIPELINES.

For education leaders, part of this means explaining the return on investment of an educational degree, the job opportunities it affords, and the wages tied to those jobs. Most institutions are already featuring this job-relevant data on their websites, noting which jobs and salaries are typically accessible upon student's graduation⁷. Tracking enrollments helps measure the health of these crucial student pipelines.

Enrollment has been steadily declining in the United States since its peak in 2010, when over 21.6M people enrolled in postsecondary institutions. The charts below compare the indexed growth of enrollments across Northeast Ohio's 14-county footprint, Ohio, and the nation with the population 19 years and younger. The chart echoes alarm bells that while the population is declining, the decline in enrollments isn't one-to-one with a shrinking youth population. Over the past two years of available enrollment data, Ohio saw the greatest decline in enrollments at -6% compared to Pennsylvania (-3%), Michigan (-2%), Illinois (+2%), Kentucky (+6%), and Indiana (+7%). While Ohio is still in the top eight states in the country as far as number of enrollments, Georgia (+4%) and North Carolina (+1%) are not too far behind.

INDEXED CHANGE IN NORTHEAST OHIO, OHIO, AND USA ENROLLMENTS COMPARED AGAINST POPULATION 19 AND UNDER, 2014-2023

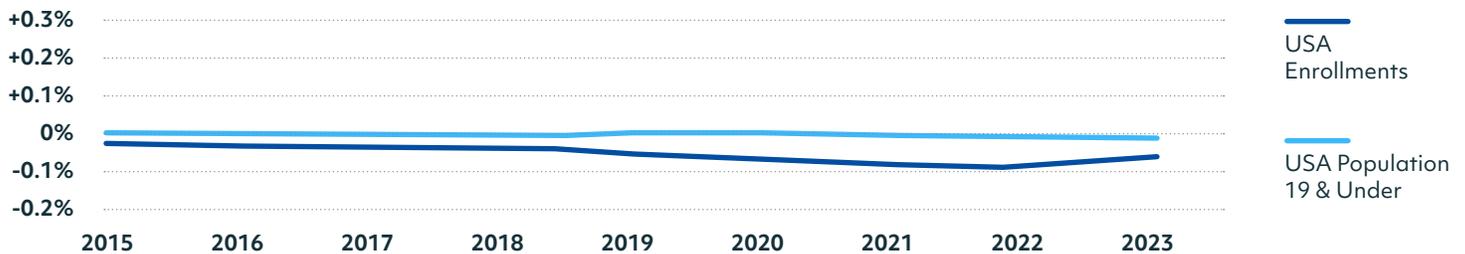
NORTHEAST OHIO 14-COUNTY REGION



OHIO



USA



Note: 0=2024 enrollment; most recent data 2014-2023

Data Source: Lightcast population and education estimates 2014-2023. Northeast Ohio 14-county region (Ashland, Cuyahoga, Erie, Geauga, Huron, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage, Richland, Stark, Summit, Tuscarawas, and Wayne).

⁷ Blake, Jessica. "Labor Market Data Play Growing Role in Higher Ed." *Inside Higher Ed*. August 01, 2023.

SHIFTING STUDENT INTERESTS: GROWING AND DECLINING PROGRAMS.

Critical to the continued success of postsecondary institutions post-COVID is the ability to pivot based on available job opportunities and appealing to student interests. While this is a complicated process, recent data offers some insight into the latter: the top growing and shrinking educational programs by student completion (2021-2023).

“As Cleveland’s university, CSU is focused on ensuring that the talent needs in the region are met in a timely manner that can contribute to the Northeast Ohio’s growth. The partnership with TeamNEO’s Aligning Opportunities work allows us all to make better data-informed decisions as we seek to attract and foster more business in Northeast Ohio.

- Nigamanth Sridhar
Senior VP and Provost at Cleveland State University

GROWING PROGRAMS:

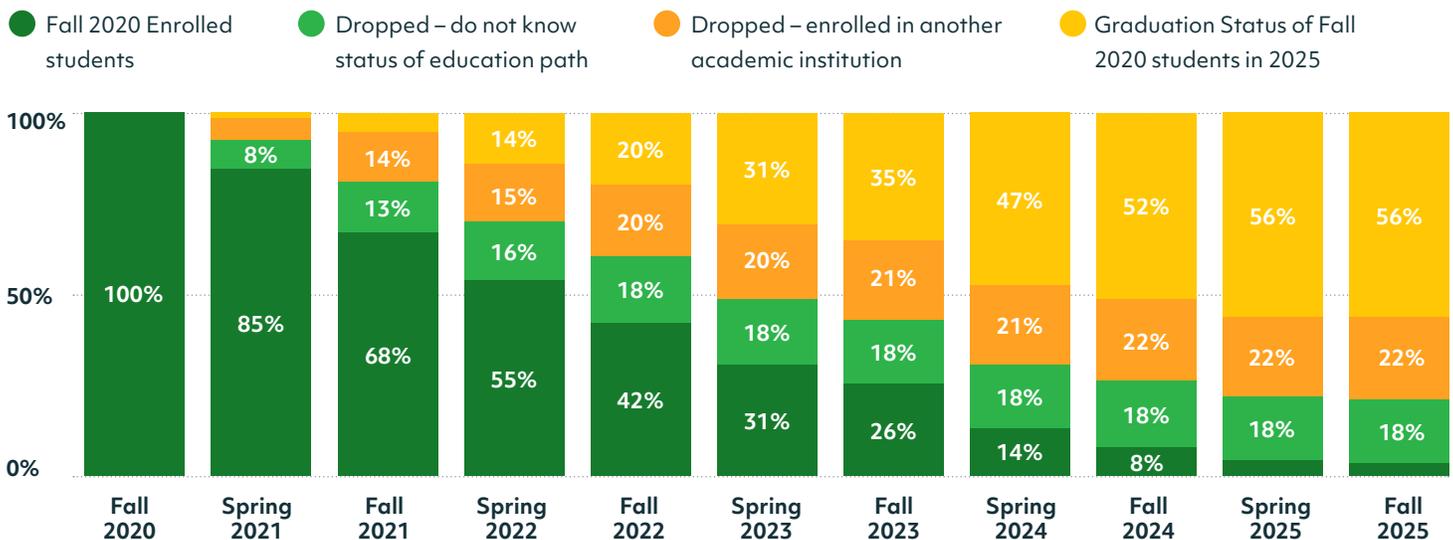
- Mechanic and Repair Technologies/Technicians (+19%)
- Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services (+17%)
- Construction Trades (+15%)
- Architecture and Related Services (+12%)
- Transportation and Materials Moving (+8%)

SHRINKING PROGRAMS:

- Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (-13%)
- Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences (-13%)
- Area, Ethnic, Cultural, Gender, and Group Studies (-13%)
- Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities (-12%)
- Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs (-10%)

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY 2020-2025 - STUDENT STATUS CASE STUDY

Percent of students in status by term



As Chief Data Officer for Cleveland State University, Katie Corcoran and the Office of Data Analytics and Institutional Research (DAIR) keep student enrollment data up to date and accessible daily. It is critical for CSU to collect data to drive timely enrollment decisions, align resources, and enable proactive student support.

The data shown here follows the Fall 2020 student cohort through Fall 2025, illustrating the percentage of students who continued their studies, those who left with no knowledge of career path, those who transferred to another institution, and those who ultimately graduated from CSU.

SINCE LAST YEAR'S REPORT, TOTAL DEMAND HAS DECREASED BY 14% WHILE ENTRY DEMAND INCREASED BY 4%.

This chart provides a quick view of how Northeast Ohio's demand for workers in key occupational groups is oversupplied, undersupplied, or in general alignment. The chart also features a new column that shows the percentage of job postings in the

occupation group that includes some kind of artificial intelligence tool, software, or platform. We used 105 different keywords to find generic and specialized Artificial Intelligence tools used across industries and looked at specific AI tools in major industries like IT, Healthcare, and Manufacturing. Of the Occupation Groups below, occupations with the highest % of AI presence in job postings include Computer & IT, Financial Clerks, Financial Specialists, Engineers, and Secretaries & Administrative Assistants.

	Occupation group	Total Demand 2024	Entry Demand 2024	Credentials Awarded 2023	Alignment	Entry Alignment	% Job Postings mentioning AI software
IT	Computer & IT Workers	7,684	3,504	3,520	4,164	-16	50%
Manufacturing	Metal & Plastic Workers	4,372	1,823	670	3,702	1,153	15%
	Installation, Maintenance & Repair Occupations	7,993	3,360	1,423	6,570	1,937	17%
	Skilled Production Workers	13,783	5,117	1,620	12,163	3,497	22%
Healthcare	Health Diagnosing & Treating Practitioners	24,637	10,118	6,553	18,084	3,565	27%
	Health Technologists & Technicians	12,475	5,230	2,663	9,812	2,567	26%
	Healthcare Therapist Aides & Support Workers	1,499	443	605	894	-162	19%
	Nursing, Psychiatric & Home Health Aides	11,451	2,682	2,516	8,935	166	15%
Life Sciences, Education, & Engineering	Architects & Engineering Technicians	1,976	933	2,025	-49	-1,092	35%
	Education	12,669	2,970	7,856	4,813	-4,886	19%
	Engineers	4,084	1,817	3,208	876	-1,391	41%
	Life Science Workers	1,842	663	6,388	-4,546	-5,725	36%
Finance & Business Services	Financial Clerks	4,388	2,450	1,739	2,649	711	52%
	Financial Specialists	5,872	3,171	4,479	1,393	-1,308	51%
	Information & Record Clerks	11,105	4,161	407	10,698	3,754	37%
	Secretaries & Administrative Assistants	5,142	2,266	584	4,558	1,682	50%
MGMT	Managers, Professional & Health	13,222	6,101	11,489	1,733	-5,388	32%
	Supervisors of Skilled Workers	5,238	2,931	731	4,507	2,200	39%

■ There is more demand than supply of credentials

■ Demand and supply appear in relative balance

■ There is more supply of credentials than demand

Source: Lightcast 2024 and Team NEO calculations

Note: Our demand supply model does not accurately capture every pathway to employment, i.e., non-registered apprenticeships, temp agencies, etc. The academic pathway and state registered apprenticeships have been our focus.

OHIO LABOR LAWS

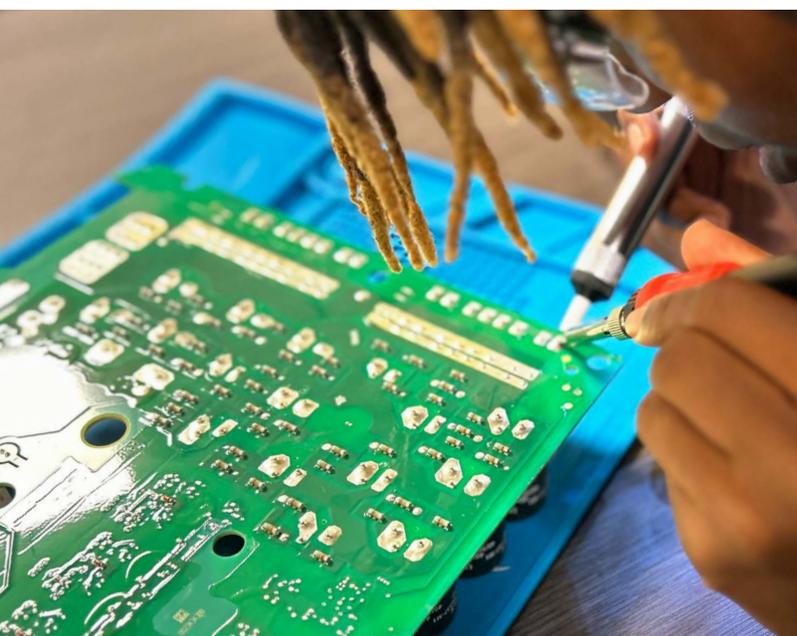
Embracing younger people in the workforce, and engaging with local education systems, may offer downstream benefits that come from tapping into a local, or 'homegrown' workforce. Benefits of tapping in locally can include lower costs of recruitment and onboarding, better overall retention, greater community support and engagement, and an expanded network for employers to tap.⁸ However, businesses must abide by federal and state child labor laws, like the Fair Labor Standards Act and Ohio Revised Code (ORC) Chapter 4109. Children under the age of 14 are not permitted to work in Ohio and special rules apply to minors between the ages of 14 and 17:

- 14–17-year-olds must secure a work permit, which requires collaboration between a minor's school district, parents, and potential employer.
- Minors can only work for five consecutive hours before they must be provided a 30-minute break. These hours and break periods must be recorded and kept for two years.
- 16- and 17-year-olds who are required to be in school and working have certain time restrictions, like no work after 11 pm.

While there are some exceptions for vocational cooperative trainings, work-studies, and other work-oriented programs per Ohio's State Board of Education, minors aged 14 or 15 cannot be employed...

- During school hours or after 7p.m.
- Before 7am or after 9pm from June 1st to September 1st or during school breaks of 5 days or more
- More than three hours on a school day,⁹ eight or more hours a day while school is out, +18 hours in any school week, and +40 hours in a week that school is not in session⁹

The ORC also defines 20 "Prohibited Occupations," or jobs that minors are not permitted to hold. Most of these jobs are related to food processing, physical trades, and manufacturing operations, and limit a minor's exposure to harmful chemicals, heavy or dangerous machinery, or other potentially dangerous environments like railyards and construction sites.¹⁰ Rules like this protect working children from being exploited or facing dangerous working conditions and are still critical today. The U.S. Department of Labor (DoL) found a 69% increase in illegal minor employment since 2018, violations of which typically incur a penalty of over \$15,000, though the DoL notes this price tag does not seem to deter violators.¹¹



⁸ Miller, Emily. "The Benefits of Hiring Local Talent, Part 1." LinkedIn. September 23, 2023.

⁹ State of Ohio Minor Labor Laws Poster. Department of Commerce Division of Industrial Compliance.

¹⁰ Ohio minors are prohibited from participating in the following occupations: slaughtering, meat-packing, processing or rendering; power-driven bakery machines; manufacturing of brick, tile and kindred products; manufacturing of chemicals; manufacturing or storage occupations involving explosives; exposure to radioactive substances and to ionizing radiations; Power-driven paper products machines; Power-driven metal forming, punching and shearing machines; operation of power-driven circular saws, band saws and guillotine shears; Power-driven woodworking machines; Coal mines; mining, other than coal; Logging and sawmilling; Motor vehicle occupations; Maritime and longshoreman occupations; Railroads; Excavation operations; Power-driven and hoisting apparatus; Roofing operations; and Wrecking, demolition, and shipbreaking.

¹¹ "Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services Announce New Efforts to Combat Exploitative Child Labor." Department of Labor. February 27, 2023.

Source: MAGNET Early College, Early Career student learns soldering.

ALIGNING OPPORTUNITIES



This serves as the foundation of the organization's talent strategy. First released in 2017 through the generous support of the Cleveland Foundation, *Aligning Opportunities* identifies the supply and demand misalignment within Northeast Ohio's talent pipeline, specifically within the in-demand, high-growth sectors of healthcare, IT and manufacturing. Since 2019, Team NEO has partnered with Delta Dental to increase awareness of *Aligning Opportunities* among the business and higher education communities. We engage key decision-makers in meaningful discussions towards resolving the talent supply and equity gap, while also providing students with greater awareness of, and access to, in-demand careers.



In partnership with Delta Dental



With generous support from:

