

»West-MEC

# BEYOND GRADUATION



**SECURING ECONOMIC SUCCESS  
FOR MARICOPA COUNTY'S FUTURE**

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## **Securing economic success for Maricopa County's future**

Given the size of Maricopa County, there is a particular interest in knowing how high school students are performing, if they are graduating, and what success follows high school. While graduating high school is a significant accomplishment for students, parents, and educators, the data is clear: It isn't—and it shouldn't be—the end goal.

### **Have you ever thought about what happens to a cohort of students over time?**

Picture an educational funnel in which we pour all our 9th graders into the top. We optimistically anticipate educational attainment, career preparation, and economic success at the end of the spout, but unfortunately, our funnel has multiple holes through which many students spill out.

**This research brief will examine available data to answer the following questions for our ninth graders:**

- ▶ How many students drop out of high school?
- ▶ How many students pursue dual or concurrent enrollment and receive early college credit?
- ▶ How many students graduate high school?
- ▶ How many students enroll in college?
- ▶ How many students complete a baccalaureate education?
- ▶ How many students earn a living-wage after graduation?
- ▶ How is Career and Technical Education (CTE) rising to the challenge of increasing student success and closing the holes in the funnel?

### **Maricopa County's High Schools**

Maricopa County is home to 58 school districts that serve over 750,000 students. This represents 67% of all students in Arizona. School districts are classified as elementary districts (kindergarten-8th grade), union high school districts (9-12th grades), and unified school districts (kindergarten through 12th grade).



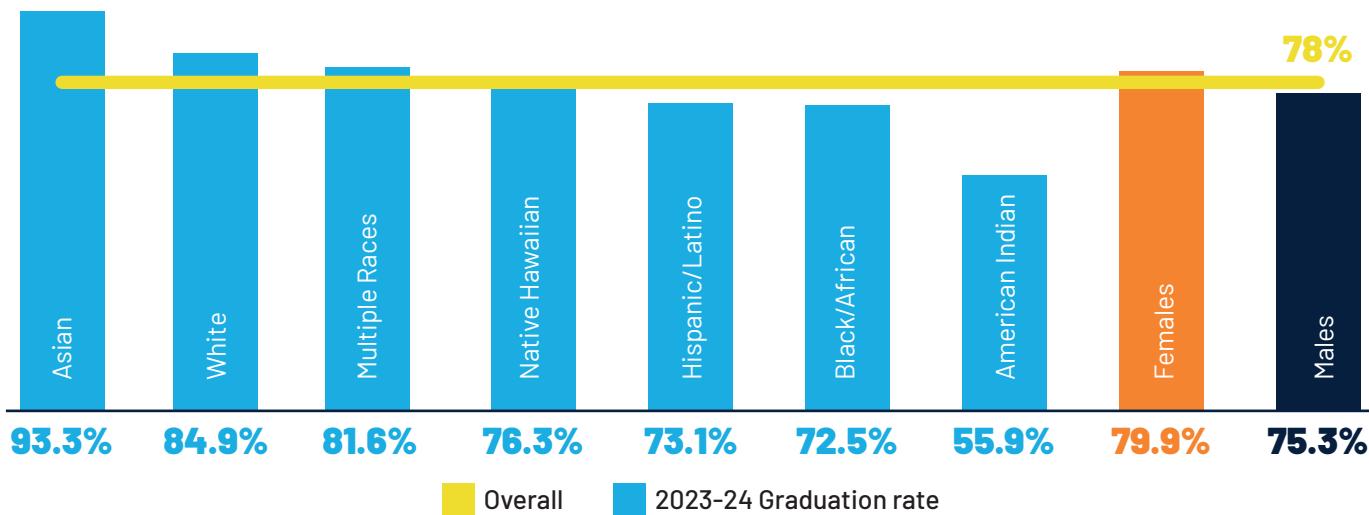
After dropping to 76% post-COVID, the portion of students graduating in four years from Maricopa high schools has risen to 78%. While the recent increase is encouraging, this is still lower than the 80% and higher rates from 2011, 2015, and 2016.

### **Exhibit 1. Four year graduation rate by cohort, Maricopa County, 2011-2023**



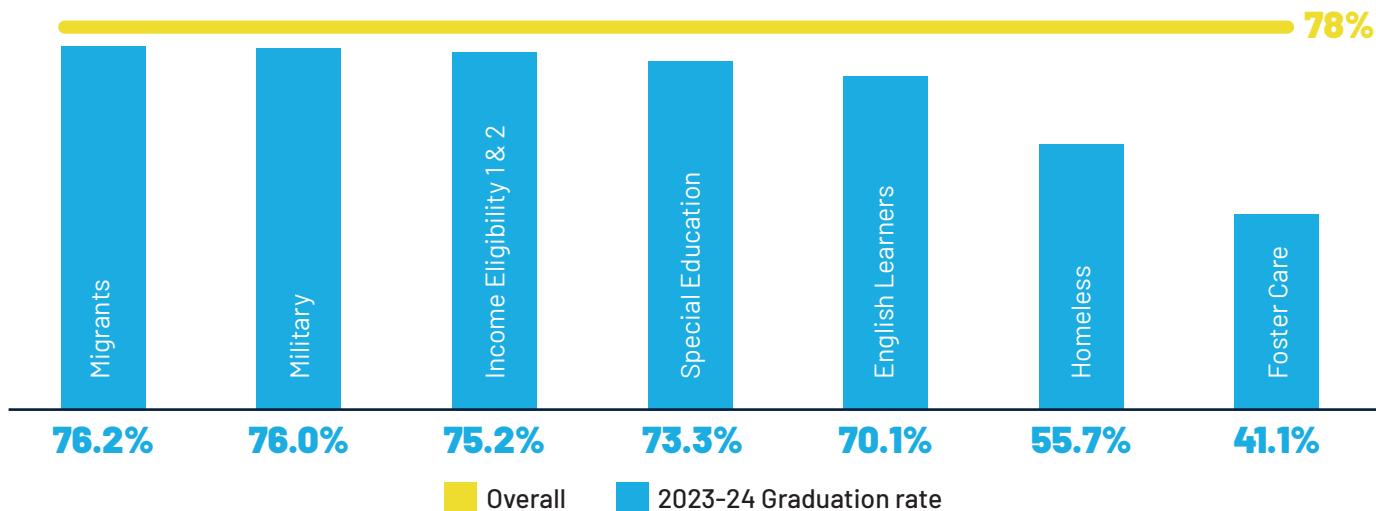
The 2023-24 graduation rate is not evenly split among demographic groups. Female students graduate at a higher rate than males, 79.9% compared to 75.3%, respectively. Among racial subgroups, Asian, white, and students of multiple races have graduation rates higher than the county's rate of 78%. Notably, graduation rates for American Indian or Alaska Native, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander were between 55.9% and 76.3%. See exhibit 2 for details.

### **Exhibit 2. 2023-24 high school graduation rate by race/ethnicity and gender**



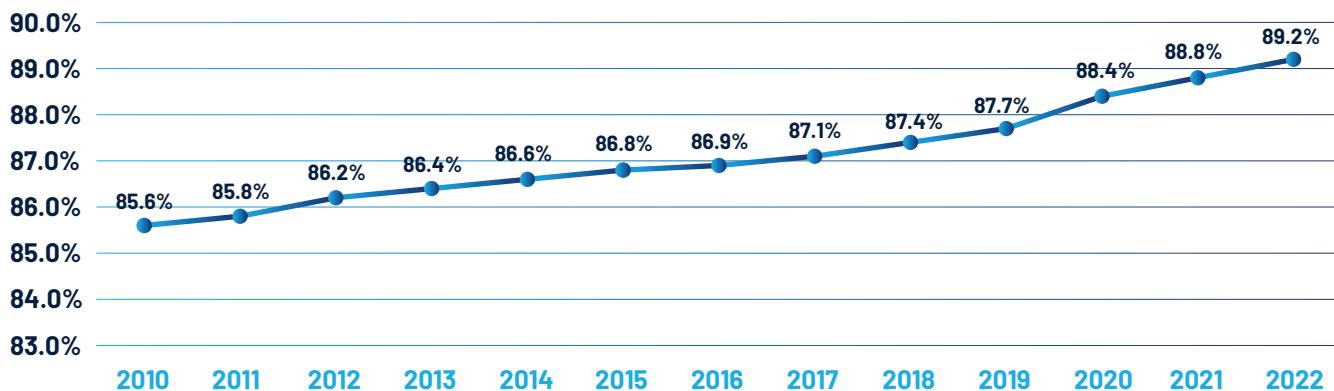
Other cohort graduate characteristics of special populations can be found in exhibit 3. Graduation rates for these student populations lag behind the overall rate of 78%.

### Exhibit 3. 2023-24 high school graduation rate by special population



Looking back to track their success, the county enrolled over 240,000 high school students in 2020-21, and 61,382 (26%) of these were freshmen. The proportion of these students graduating is higher than that of the state as a whole (77.5%), but both of these rates fall behind the nation's average of 87%. In fact, Arizona ranks last in high school graduation among the 50 states. On the bright side, educational attainment data indicates that a greater portion of Maricopa residents are completing high school, up from 85.6% in 2010 to 89.2% in 2022.

### Exhibit 4. High school graduate or higher (5-year estimate) in Maricopa County, 2010-2022



So, if 78% of 9th grade students who started high school in Maricopa County in 2020-21 graduate in 2023-24, then what happens to the other 22% or approximately 13,500 students? We know that the dropout rate is 6%, representing approximately 3,680 students, and another 10% of 16 to 24-year-olds in Arizona are not going to school or working (representing approximately 6,140 students when applied specifically to Maricopa County). This leaves a significant number of students unaccounted for, who are likely neither in college nor career ready.



West-MEC has offered me many opportunities for my future career. It not only gets me prepared for the workforce, but it gives me certifications to work as a dental assistant right out of college! I love the environment and people here. Everyone has one thing in common, which is dental. We all come from different backgrounds and have different dynamics, but that is what makes it special. West-MEC is preparing me to succeed.



**Emma Speight, Dental Assisting Alumna**



## College Enrollment

For those students who successfully navigated the pressures and stresses of high school to experience graduation, national data shows that of these **3.1 million** in 2023, only about **1.9 million (61.4%)**, were enrolled in college by that fall.

Compare this figure to the latest state data indicating that **48.3%** of Arizona's high school graduates went straight to any community college or university immediately the fall after graduation.

In Maricopa County specifically, only **36%** of the population **18 to 24 years** is enrolled in college or graduate school.

If we do that math, of the 78% who graduate high school in the region, **only 48% of ninth graders end up enrolling into any type of college/university** (since 36% of the county's traditional college-age population is enrolled in college).

**For every 100 students in the region, only 48 will graduate high school and will initially seek any form of higher education.**



# 52%

Stated differently, just under half of high school graduates are pursuing higher education. The majority (52% of Maricopa residents) must therefore be prepared after high school for their first career with adequate professional, technical, and employability skills. As surprising as this 48% figure may be to some, let us dig a little bit deeper to understand why this is happening.

Firstly, let's recall that higher education and "college" does not necessarily mean a traditional 4-year university degree. Many of the fastest-growing career fields actually require credentials other than a bachelor's degree. In fact, the latest national data indicates that a growing 27% of high school completers enroll in 2-year community colleges. A growing number of high school students are opting not to prepare for immediate postsecondary enrollment at all.

For example, one issue at play is the rising cost of college tuition. The average annual cost to educate a university student in Arizona is **\$18,855**. With the state only contributing a third of this, students are left with a cost of approximately **\$12,000** per year, leaving many to question if this is worth the investment. This contrasts with findings from the 2020 Gallup Survey, "The Arizona We Want," which found that **81%** of respondents want to increase the number of Arizona high school graduates enrolling in **universities, community colleges, or technical/trade schools**.

**Many students would like to pursue a postsecondary education, but with rising costs, significant student debt, and gut-wrenching underemployment rates, higher education is no longer a perceived option for many. And there are plenty of metrics indicating this trend.**

**The 2023 passing rates in Maricopa County for the ACT statewide assessments in English Language Arts and Mathematics that all public school students take in Grade 11 are 43% and 35%, respectively.**

While this represents only a portion of the entrance requirements for postsecondary enrollment, this metric does seem to indicate that fewer students are even eligible for university enrollment. Another indicator of college preparation is the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

According to survey data from the National College Attainment Network, "Seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education." The Arizona Board of Regents maintains a FAFSA completion dashboard for the state of Arizona. As of August 14, 2023, 34.6% of Arizona seniors from the class of 2024 have completed the FAFSA. At 35%, Maricopa County's rate largely mirrors the state trend.



## Early College Credit

A successful strategy nationally for boosting student confidence, college preparedness, and academic acumen, is early college credit. Here is where we find a few examples within the county that helps Maricopa shine bright.

### Dual and Concurrent Enrollment

Securing early college credit is important to local residents. In 2020, nearly one-quarter of high school graduates in Arizona took at least one dual enrollment course, earning themselves college credit prior to graduation. This is an increase from 2017 when the rate was only 20.6%. While taking a single dual enrollment course may seem trivial, the impact this experience has on a student should not be underestimated.

On average, students taking dual enrollment courses are **more than twice as likely to attend college** than students who don't take advantage of this opportunity.

And it doesn't end with just attending college.

Dual enrollment students were also found to **persist in college at a rate 1.2 times higher** than their non-dual enrollment peers.



Dual Enrollment is great because I will finish college much faster. My parents and I are happy that Dual Enrollment is less expensive than college. It is awesome that I can earn college and high school credits at the same time!



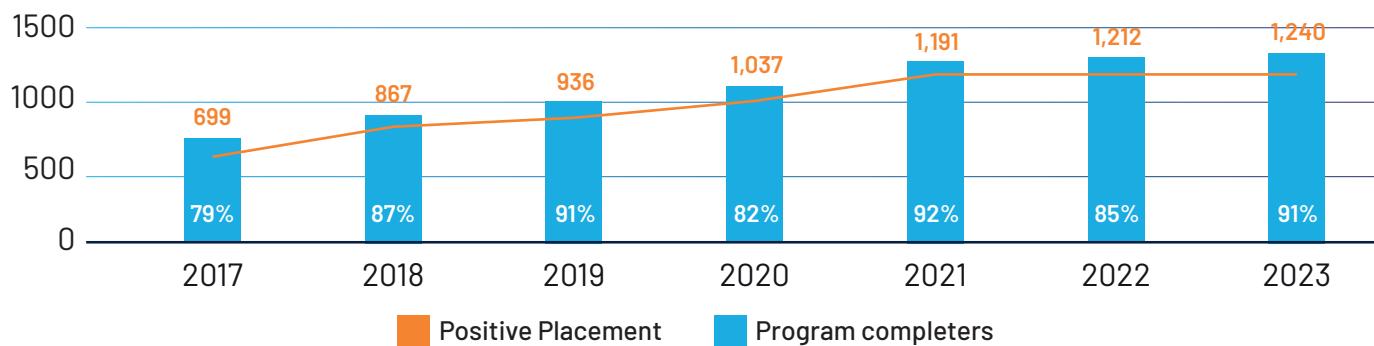
**Issac Madson, Auto Technology Alumnus**

### West-MEC's Successful Impact

Western Maricopa Education Center (West-MEC) is a public school district that provides innovative Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. West-MEC serves 50 member schools and over 40,000 students within satellite schools for a total of 59 campuses and 44,000 students enhancing a variety of hands-on learning programs. These CTE programs are often elective courses offered to students at their designated high school campuses. West-MEC also serves homeschool students and students from charter and private schools.

From 2017 to 2023, the number of program completers in West-MEC's secondary program for high school students has nearly doubled, from 700 in 2017 to 1,240 in 2023. More than 90% of program completers from 2023 are positively engaged in the economy through direct employment, postsecondary education, the military, or mission work. Looking at these seven years of data collection in the exhibit below demonstrates growth in terms of students served (i.e. program completers) as well as an increasing rate of positive placement following program completion

**Exhibit 5. West-MEC Program Completers and Positive Placement Rate, 2017-2023**



The success of West-MEC's satellite programs is equally impressive in advancing the county forward. 81% of all central and satellite CTE students who tested passed the Arizona Technical Skills Assessment for their program. 86% of all Central and Satellite CTE program concentrators continue on to further education, employment, military service and/or missions with 65% continuing on to post-secondary. 86% of all Central and Satellite CTE students who tested, earned an industry recognized credential.

Additionally, West-MEC has leveraged Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs) that have earned program participants over 12,400 postsecondary credits. This not only provides early college credit to these participants before they step foot in a college classroom, it saves them valuable money on tuition, books, and other fees. Further, 99% of program completers earn an industry-recognized credential that gives them a leg up in the workforce. All of this is made possible through attendance and retention rates over 93%, yielding a rate of 98% of students earning a "C" or better in their coursework.



I love CTE because it has helped me develop more skills and it has prepared me for the real world. I also love the fact that we work hands-on projects, helping us understand more of the career.



**Pablo Sesma Zavala,  
General Construction Technology Alumnus**

These are powerful statistics. These positive results lead to hiring and success in the labor market as evidenced by regional employers going on record to say that they prefer hiring candidates that complete West-MEC's training programs. Additionally, the companies hiring West-MEC students has more than doubled from representation across seven industries in program year 2020-21 to 17 in program year 2023-24. Looking to the future, West-MEC is partnering with local employers and considering adding training across other in-demand sectors, such as Advanced Manufacturing, Cloud Technology, Construction Trades and Medical Technology.



We continue to be successful with West-MEC graduates due to their strong work ethic, eagerness to learn and job specific skills.

***Tom Magurany, Rummel Construction Inc.***



When I hire a West-MEC student, I'm excited to get them because they go through a very extensive training process.



***Rick Depke, Service Director, Larry H. Miller Toyota Peoria***

Given the success of dual enrollment efforts and West-MEC's secondary program, the question becomes: Why aren't more students taking advantage of these programs that have a far superior track record than the traditional early college credit approaches or initial pursuit of a four-year degree? How might the capacity and reach of these programs be expanded?



### ***Life After 12th***

Less than half (48%) of Maricopa County public school students are deemed college-ready, not dropping out of high school, and heading straight into the pursuit of a post-secondary education. But how many are actually completing their post-secondary goals?

***In Arizona, available data shows that***

even once getting accepted and starting classes at the university only **30.3%** of high school graduates completed a college degree or certificate program within six years.

The 2023 Postsecondary Attainment Report from Arizona's Board of Regents states that, "Among the 2017 class of high school graduates, 30.3 percent earned a certificate, credential or an associate or bachelor's degree within six years." So, if less than one-third of high school graduates are completing their college education within six years, we can draw two data-guided conclusions:

Firstly, applied to the **48 local students** who graduate high school and enroll in any form of higher education, we can accurately project that **14 of our 100** 9th graders will complete their postsecondary degree or certificate program within **6 years**.

Secondly, we should seek a more successful route to gainful employment after high school for the vast majority of our students, even those perceived to be "college-bound" when completing high school.

Moreover, Arizona students who take at least two CTE courses within a single career pathway boast graduation rates above 95% and industry-recognized credential attainment in in-demand fields, providing a strong return on investment.



The West-MEC program has poured countless resources into the success of their students. I felt during my program that I was always pushed to do better and that I was praised for little victories as well as large achievements! I also learned the importance of communication and teamwork. They gave us real world practice to put into place after we graduated!



***Daniel Deras, Welding Technology Alumnus***



## ***Our Local Job Market***

So, how many residents need an advanced degree in Maricopa County to ensure a vibrant economy? With proper context, the authors support most of the "Billions to Gain" message of Achieve60AZ, which states that 60 percent of adults ages 25-64 in the state shall hold a postsecondary credential (certificate or degree) by 2030.

Currently, 50.9% of Arizona residents (25-64 years of age) have completed a 2- or 4-year degree or have an active professional certificate or license.

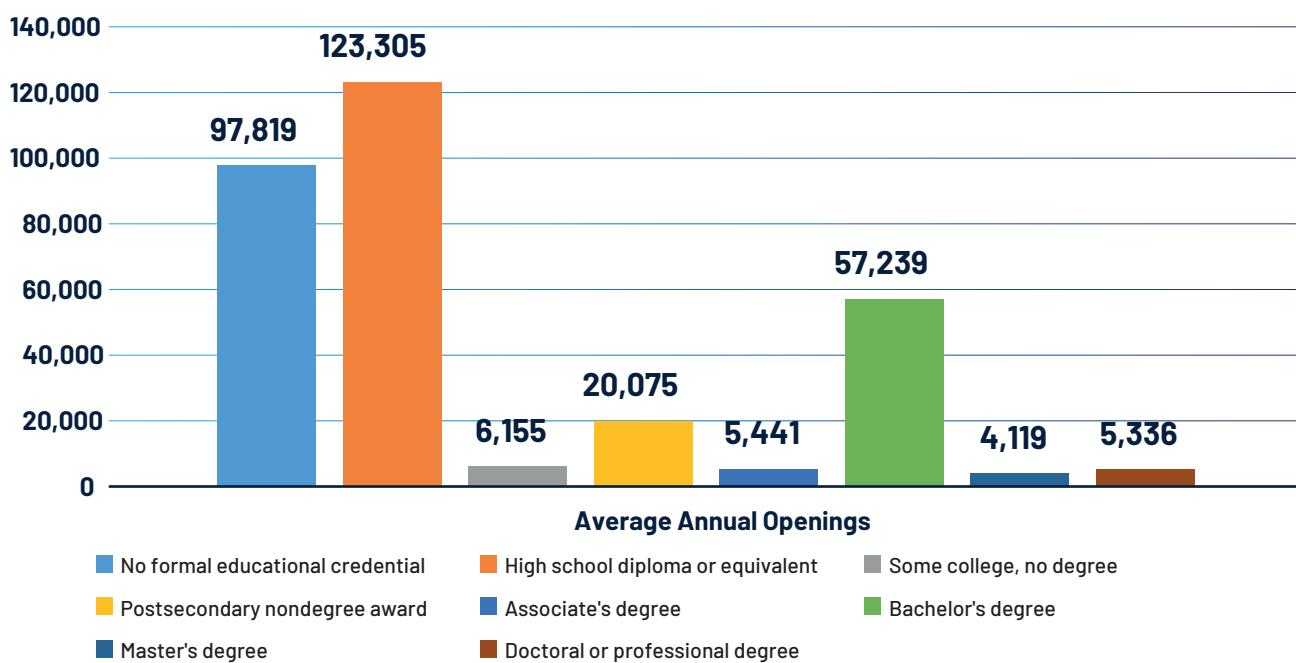


# 21%

The solution to closing this gap is often assumed to be increased university acceptance and bachelor degree attainment. However, according to the latest labor market data from Lightcast of the 319,489 average annual job openings projected to be available in Maricopa County through 2028, only 21% of these (66,700 job openings) will require a bachelor's degree or higher. Most projected job openings require CTE credentials, industry certificates, or an Associate Degree.

**Only 21% of jobs openings in Maricopa County will require a bachelor's degree or higher through 2028.**

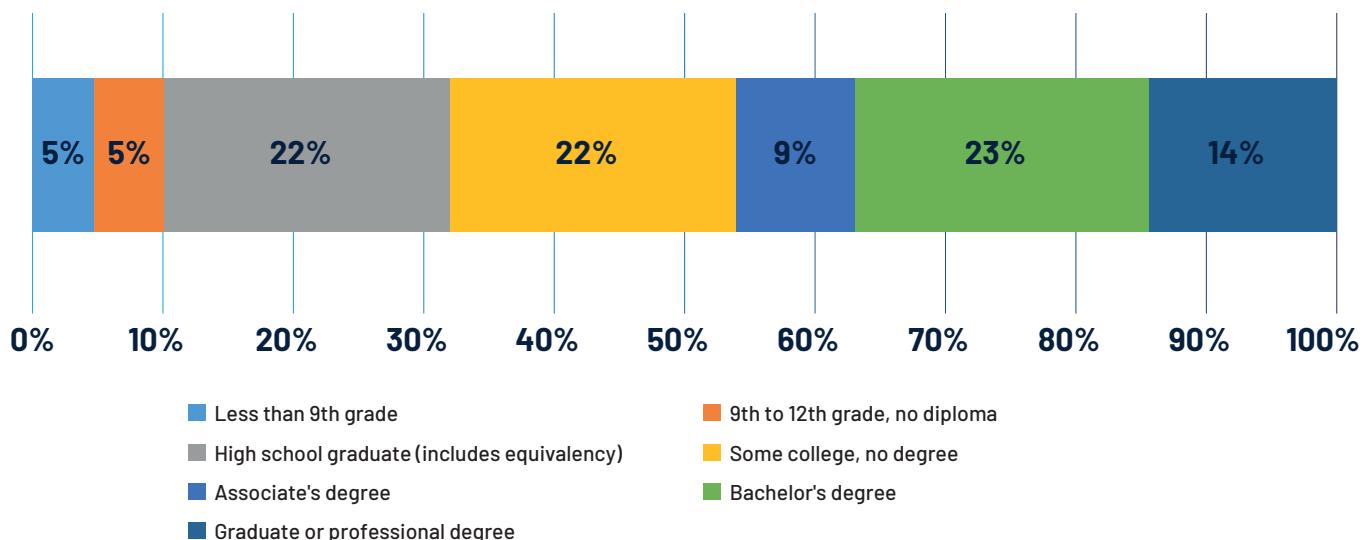
**Exhibit 6. Projected Average Annual Job Openings by Education Level, 2023-2028**



These projected job openings by education level are somewhat at odds with the latest educational attainment data for Maricopa County. We know that only 21% of projected job openings will require a bachelor's degree or higher, but 37% of the population aged 25-years-old and higher possesses this level of education. Additionally, 9% have an associate degree, and 22% have completed some college without earning a degree.

About 22% of the population are high school graduates, while 5% have attended some high school but have not graduated, and another 5% have less than a ninth grade education. So, strictly from a supply-demand perspective, tracking more students to the university is not going to fill future job vacancies.

## Exhibit 7. Projected Average Annual Job Openings by Education Level, 2023-2028



The most pressing issue is the nearly 50% of job openings (nearly 155,000, or approximately two and a half times as many that require a bachelor's degree or higher) that require some type of specialized training, including a high school diploma, industry-recognized credential, CTE, or an associate degree or certificate from a community college. This data speaks to the dire need to expand CTE, technical training, career-connected education programs, and industry certification attainment throughout Maricopa County at more than double the rate as baccalaureate attainment.

So, while Arizona does need a preponderance of learners to earn a postsecondary credential, for most it does not need to be a **4-year university degree**. Arizona must expand a sufficient number of residents for CTE and industry-credential required positions to meet tomorrow's labor market demands.

**These family-supporting jobs keep the fabric of Maricopa's labor market intact and represent the majority of economic opportunity in the future.**

**Our well-intentioned rhetoric, too often focused on preparing most students to obtain bachelor's degree or higher immediately after high school (e.g. Billions to Gain), needs to take into account high school dropouts, the underemployed, and industry credential attainment.**

This includes investing in CTE programs and facilities to meet the Achieve60AZ goals. This analysis also forces us to focus on the misalignment between awarded degrees, the available employment opportunities that someone qualifies for, and the lack of real-world job skills. Combined, these three factors force additional recent alumni to accept "gray-collar jobs"—taking positions that neither need nor require the education they received.





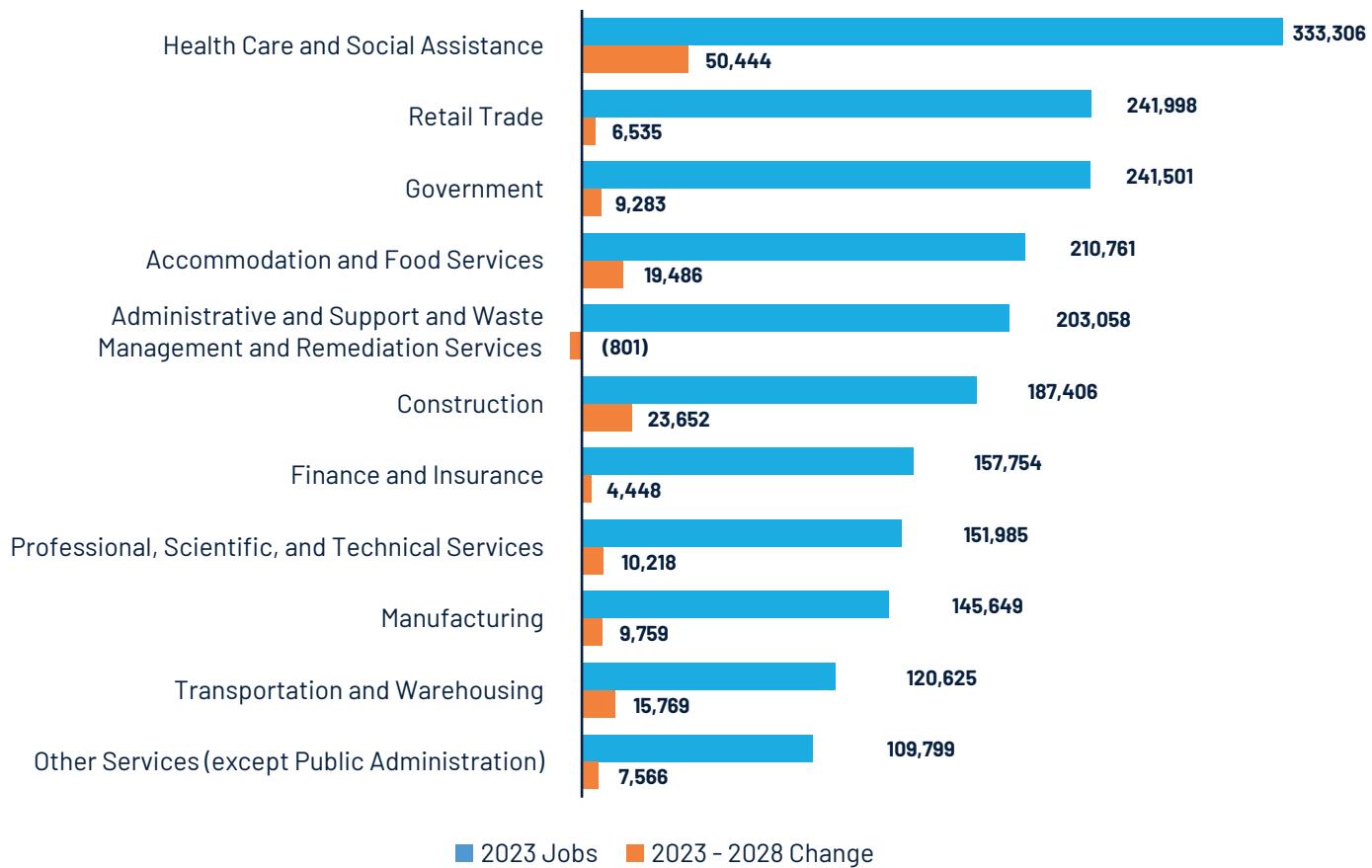
My son is going to the Air Conditioning Technology program. It is fantastic. Companies are literally begging to hire him and he hasn't even graduated yet. The instructors are all real-world, highly experienced professionals who know the value of hands-on training. I couldn't recommend West-MEC higher. An amazing value too.



**Dan O'Connell, West-MEC parent**

## **Industry Composition of Maricopa County**

Below are the 11 largest industries in Maricopa County, each employing greater than 100,000 jobs in 2023 (represented by the blue bars in exhibit 8). Ten of these 11 industries are projected to add new jobs through 2028, with Health Care and Social Assistance leading the way by adding more than **50,000 jobs** during this time period (represented by the orange bar in exhibit 8).



Many of these industries employ family-supporting, technician-level jobs that can be trained for in two years or fewer through the county's CTE offerings. For example, the Health Care and Social Assistance sector employs respiratory therapists, dental hygienists, and licensed practical and vocational nurses among many other in-demand occupations that CTE students can be qualified for within two years of education and training. The table below highlights four industry sectors with a large portion of these jobs, the average earnings per job within that industry, as well as three illustrative examples of occupations that pay high wages, have low barriers to entry, and ample job opportunities.

**Exhibit 9. Four key industries in Maricopa County that employ high-paying jobs that take two years or fewer of education and training**

Industry	Avg. Earnings Per Job
<b>Health Care and Social Assistance</b>	<b>\$80,152</b>
Respiratory Therapists	\$75,880
Dental Hygienists	\$93,424
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	\$66,727
<b>Construction</b>	<b>\$88,028</b>
Carpenters	\$55,022
Electricians	\$59,864
First-Line Supervisors of Construction Trades and Extraction Workers	\$76,390
<b>Manufacturing</b>	<b>\$111,361</b>
Computer Numerically Controlled Tool Programmers	\$63,147
Machinists	\$55,769
First-Line Supervisors of Production and Operating Workers	\$73,018
<b>Transportation and Warehousing</b>	<b>\$69,273</b>
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	\$55,689
Flight Attendants	\$75,662
First-Line Supervisors of Transportation and Material Moving Workers, Except Aircraft Cargo Handling Supervisors	\$62,693

Maricopa County's rapidly evolving job market demands an education system that prepares students for the aforementioned high-growth industries, making Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways critical to the region's economic vitality.

CTE programs address these needs directly by equipping students with hands-on, job-specific skills and credentials that align with local industry demands. By fostering partnerships between schools and employers, these pathways ensure that students not only graduate ready to meet workforce requirements but also gain access to stable, high-paying career opportunities, driving economic growth and resilience for the county.



I love the opportunity it is giving high school students to not only graduate high school but also graduate with a certification in the program they selected. I have a daughter in hairstyling and I love seeing the growth and learning! My son will be starting Powersports Technology next year! Excellent program and I am thankful my children get to be a part of it.

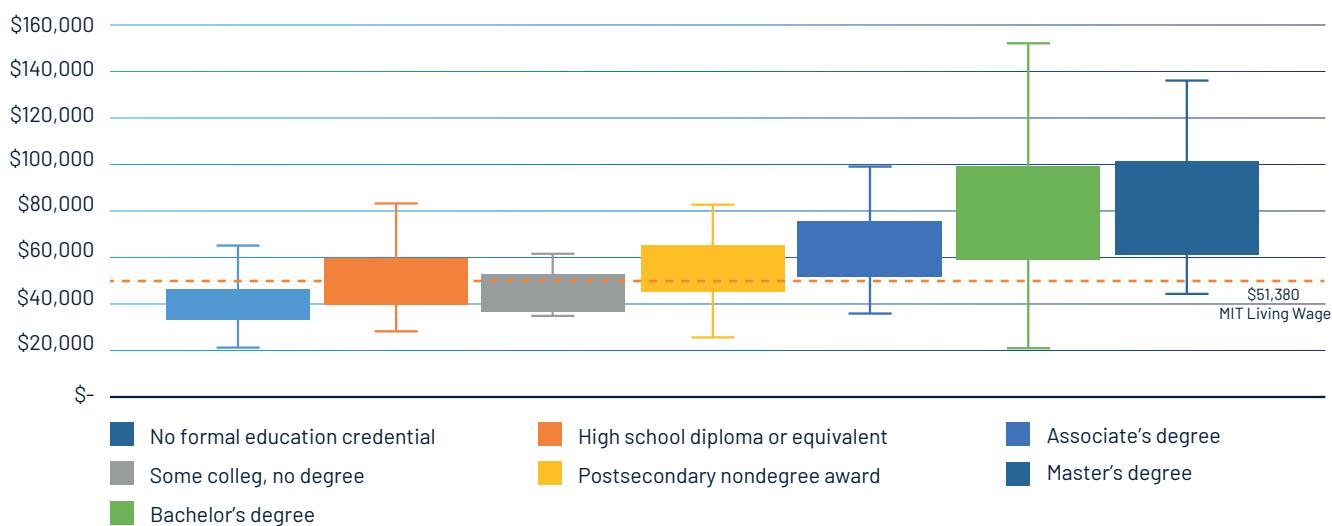


***Heather Laing, West-MEC parent***

## ***Living Wage Attainment***

According to the latest data from MIT's Living Wage Calculator, a single adult with no children in Maricopa County needs to earn \$24.70 per hour or \$51,380 before taxes to make ends meet. Looking at tax data on earnings across nearly 800 occupations in Maricopa County, we can identify the level of education necessary to meet this living wage threshold. The box and whisker plot below shows the distribution of earnings by education requirement for jobs in Maricopa County in 2023. Each box represents half of the data for each education level, with the top and bottom whiskers accounting for the upper and lower quartiles, respectively.

### ***Exhibit 10. Maricopa County Resident Wage Ranges by Education Level, 2023***



Taking a look at the green box, we can see that half of the workers in jobs that typically require a bachelor's degree for entry earn between \$60,000 and \$100,000 per year, which is welcome news since these workers earn above the living wage threshold. However, nearly 25% of the jobs that typically require a bachelor's degree pay less than \$60,000, and some as low as \$20,000 per year. This data adds additional nuance and deeper understanding to familiar "college-for-all" claims" asserting a causation between educational achievement and higher earnings. In fact, with only 21% of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree, and 25% of 4-year earners underemployed.



## **Compare this with workers in jobs that typically require an associate degree and a few things stand out**

- 01**  
The lower quartile of jobs requiring an associate degree ends just below **\$40,000**, which is still below the living wage threshold, but nearly double the lower limit for bachelor's degree jobs at **\$20,000**.
- 02**  
Greater than **75%** of jobs that require an associate degree pay above the living wage threshold of **\$51,380** per year. Combine this with the higher ceiling for the lower quartile of earners compared to bachelor's degree jobs and we can begin to understand where the quality jobs in Maricopa County fall by education level.
- 03**  
**25%** of associate degree holders earn **MORE** than **50%** of bachelor's degree earners.
- 04**  
Half of certificate holders (with a postsecondary nondegree award) earn more than **20%** of bachelor's degree earners.
- 05**  
We can safely presume that the bottom quartile of bachelor's degree earners didn't think they'd end up earning just over \$20,000 per year when they could have saved thousands in tuition and fees and earned a much more lucrative salary in an in-demand field with better career training and preparation while in high school.

This analysis shows that 25% of jobs that require a BA pay less than the living wage, occasionally resulting in working poverty. Unfortunately, these data also indicate that 7.3% of Arizonans across all education levels find themselves underemployed—not unemployed. [ U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (IPUMS); U.S. Department of Labor, O\*NET] These residents find themselves at the bottom of this whisker plot...often employed in work that under-utilizes their education/skills, or are employed part-time but not by choice, and often with student loans debt they cannot afford.

## Economic Impact

Speaking more broadly about the economic value of the region, the Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD), conducted a March 2019 analysis with EMSI (now Lightcast). The analysis found that the additional income of approximately \$7.2 billion created by MCCCD is equal to 3% of the total gross regional product of Maricopa County as a whole.

This is the equivalent of supporting **96,209 jobs**, or one out of every 27 jobs in the county.

Further, for every \$1 that students pay for tuition to MCCCD colleges, they will earn **\$4** in higher future earnings for an annual rate of return of **15.5%**.

Furthermore, **94%** of MCCCD's students are from Maricopa County, so these impacts are felt primarily by local residents.

And beyond the impact on students, MCCCD spends nearly \$500 million annually on payroll and benefits, supporting 10,826 full-time and part-time employees, making it a significant contributor to the county's prosperity.

A similar economic impact is created by the fact that 37,000+ students from **48 high schools** in the northern and western cities of the Phoenix Metropolitan area are enrolled in West-MEC funded programs. Year after year, West-MEC focuses on Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that enable high school and adult students to build their future in alignment with the majority of available jobs in the County.



An impressive 97% of students earning 5,953 credentials during the most recent year directly contributes to the local economy. This is a phenomenal impact which far exceeds the national average of 20% of high school graduates earning an industry recognized credential. It is no surprise that 100% of employers surveyed are likely to continue to hire West-MEC graduates.

## Recommendations

Given our local reality of underwhelming completion rates for university graduates, and the growing need for more residents to have industry credentials and technical skills prior to high school graduation, how can we help all our students be prepared for high-paying occupations in our region?

## **Recommendation 1:**

### ***Equally Promote the Five E's***

It may seem counterintuitive, but in order to fuel economic success and increase educational empowerment we must shift our thinking, and language, about preparing all students for the 4-year university. Most high school counselors, administrators, teachers, and school board members assert that students need to be university-prepared. Well-intentioned, they promote a “one size fits all” approach to university-prep high school curriculum. Instead, students need both a broad base of knowledge and tangible skills to be job ready on graduation day, and there are many paths to a successful career/future. One approach to help change the mindset about options after high school is to widen the path and redefine student success beyond “college for all.”

**We recommend shifting local goals, and language, to ensure all students are prepared for at least one of the five E's:**

- **EMPLOYMENT**
- **EDUCATION**
- **EARNING WHILE LEARNING**
- **ENLISTMENT**
- **ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Promoting all five E's as equally viable post-secondary pathways leading to high-demand, high wage jobs will result in learners that are more motivated, career-ready, adaptable, and fulfilled.

## **Recommendation 2:**

### ***Expand CTE for a Strong Return on Investment (ROI)***

Public school districts that provide innovative Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs are in the ideal position to provide Maricopa County's future workforce with a general education combined with applied technical skills, industry-driven credentials, and specific preparation for employment. Concerted efforts must be implemented now to fix the leaky funnel effect occurring in between high school dropouts, high school graduates, and postsecondary graduation rates.

Boasting completion rates consistently above 95%, CTE in Arizona is as close as we can get to a ‘sure thing’ that provides a strong Return on Investment, and industry-recognized credentials in in-demand fields, resulting in family-supporting wages. Concerted efforts to expand and replicate the dual enrollment and graduation success found in CTE programs should take center stage.

## **Recommendation 2 (cont):**

***Increasing investments in CTE facilities, people, and programs will result in five significant outcomes:***

### **High Employment**

CTE programs have a proven track record of preparing students for immediate, in-demand jobs within local industries, often at wages that support families. CTE graduates are more likely to be employed soon after high school and fill roles in industries critical to Maricopa County's economic resilience.

### **Pathways to Economic Independence**

Compared to the traditional four-year college path, CTE provides a quicker, more affordable route to stable, well-paying careers. Fewer years in school and lower associated costs mean that students accumulate less debt, allowing them to enter the workforce sooner and begin contributing economically. This quicker turnaround translates to a faster return on investment (ROI) for residents by fostering a financially independent workforce ready to contribute to the local economy.

### **Industry-Aligned Skill Development**

CTE programs are designed with local employers, ensuring students gain the precise skills and certifications needed in today's job market. When Maricopa County invests in CTE, they invest in a highly relevant workforce aligned with current and future market demands.

### **Public Cost Savings**

Students engaged in CTE programs are less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate with marketable skills. This reduces public spending on remedial education and other social services, as fewer students require additional support after high school. The county can reallocate these savings to enhance educational or community services, benefiting residents directly.

### **Economic Stability**

Investing in CTE also strengthens the community's social fabric by preparing a generation of skilled, employable individuals who can contribute as taxpayers. The earnings and spending of these CTE-trained residents fuel local businesses, increase sales tax revenue, and strengthen the community's economic stability. With CTE graduates often working in vital sectors—healthcare, technology, and the trades—investing in these programs creates a more resilient workforce and a stronger local economy.

## **Recommendation 3:**

### ***Facilitate “Leaky Funnel” discussions***

This report includes an infographic entitled “The Fate of 100 Maricopa County 9th Graders.” It offers a powerful visualization of longitudinal student outcomes, illustrating the critical challenges and opportunities within the local education system. By breaking down the trajectory of a cohort, this analysis highlights where students succeed, falter, or fail to transition into higher education or the workforce.

We must collectively acknowledge that data changes from year to year, and every statistic has a standard deviation and could certainly be debated a few percentage points in either direction. Once we rise above the specific percentages, the overarching insight is essential for understanding the systemic “leaky funnel” effect, where gaps in retention, preparedness, and career alignment hinder many students from achieving economic independence.

Encourage and facilitate discussions using this infographic to underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions, such as expanded Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and industry-aligned career preparation, to address these drop-off points and equip more students for sustainable success.

## **Recommendation 4:**

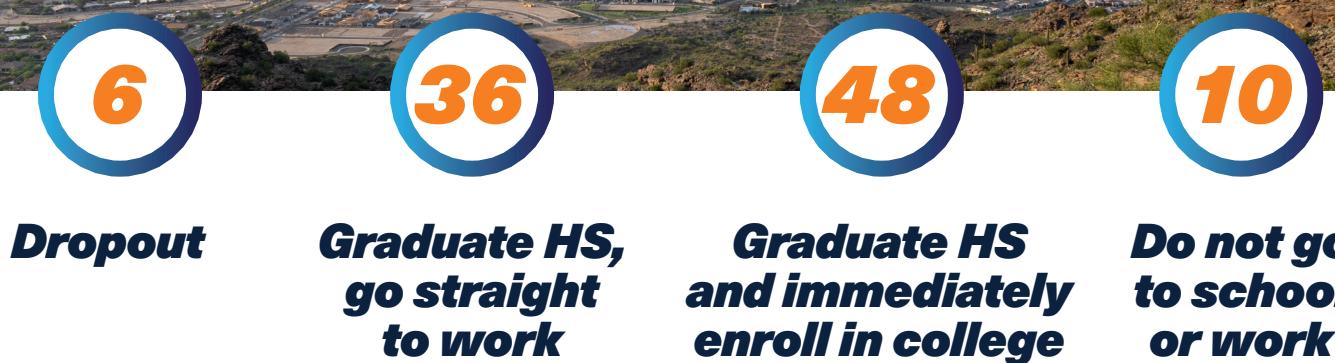
### ***Redefining Success for Every Student***

To empower Maricopa County’s youth and address the realities of our education system, we must redefine both the goal of education and the measures of success. High school graduation should no longer be seen as the ultimate achievement, nor should enrollment in higher education be viewed as the definitive next step, given that only 30% of those who enter post-secondary institutions complete their degrees. Instead, our focus must shift to ensuring students graduate with a high school diploma plus relevant industry certifications, hands-on work-based learning experiences, and the skills needed to thrive in the workforce in order to secure commensurate employment.

This vision requires rethinking the education pipeline, emphasizing retention and meaningful engagement over mere educational pipeline expansion. Earlier self-discovery, intentional career exploration, and personalized, hands-on learning pathways are essential. As West-MEC so aptly models for the region, all education pathways should align each student’s career aspirations with their unique personality, aptitudes, and interests, ensuring their initial career choices are fulfilling, sustainable, and aligned with the local labor market.

Imagine a future where every student leaves high school prepared with the skills, experiences, and credentials needed to thrive in the workforce. By integrating practical experience, tangible skills, and recognized credentials into every student’s education journey, we can empower them to achieve economic independence and lifelong success. This approach represents a shift from merely guiding students through the system to equipping them for real-world challenges and opportunities, creating a generation of graduates ready to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the broader economy.

# THE FATE OF 100 MARICOPA COUNTY 9TH GRADERS



*Of the 48 college enrollees*

**35** Do not finish in six years

*Of the 13 that graduate*

**7** Are underemployed

**6** Secure commensurate employment after college graduation

**6**

*Students win the “one way to win” game*

**94**

*Don’t.*

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- ▶ Compared to 77% percentage of AZ students statewide who graduate from high school in 4 years according to: <https://www.arizonafuture.org/progress-meters/education/high-school-graduationrate/>
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- ▶ <https://www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data>
- ▶ <https://www.ncan.org/general/custom.asp?page=NationalFAFSACCompletionRatesforHighSchoolSeniorsandGraduates>
- ▶ <https://www.azregents.edu/fafsa-completion-dashboard>
- ▶ 93% of AZ voters support ensuring that every student can access dual-enrollment or other early college opportunities to earn college credit while in high school. Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) 2024 Arizona Voters' Agenda survey
- ▶ <https://www.helios.org/media/m5oegog2/brief-dual-enrollment-in-az-update-date-february-2023.pdf>
- ▶ Additionally, West-MEC serves a variety of homeschool students and students from charter and private schools attend their Central Programs significantly
- ▶ "Positive Placement" indicates active engagement in the economy, including employment, education, military, or mission work.
- ▶ FY 2023-2024 CTED Achievement Profile. <https://cteaccountability.github.io/ctedachievementprofiles/2024/west-mec.html>
- ▶ Why I Hire West-MEC video series: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkQKM4aYd5KJ9thBgJLq\\_Cq\\_vGWteOSwx](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkQKM4aYd5KJ9thBgJLq_Cq_vGWteOSwx)
- ▶ Auto Tech, Collision Repair, Medical Assisting, Medium/Heavy Diesel, Physical Therapy, Vet Sciences, and Welding

## **Sources Cited Cont.**

- ▶ All seven of the aforementioned industries as well as Aviation Maintenance Technology, Construction, Dental Assisting, Electrical, Hairstyling, IT Security, Law, Nursing, Pharmacy Science, and Precision Machining
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- ▶ The 2023 Postsecondary Attainment Report from Arizona's Board of Regents <https://www.azregents.edu/news-releases/college-enrollment-arizona-high-school-graduates-educationalattainment-remains-low>
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- ▶ Notably, on page 22 of the Billions to Gain report, their predicted educational attainment per new cohort of high school graduates in Arizona does not include high school dropouts, and industry credentials are not counted (it considers anything less than a AA/AS degree as dropping out of college).
- ▶ 50.9 percent of Arizona residents 25-64 years of age who have completed a 2- or 4-year degree or who have an active professional certificate or license. <https://educationforwardarizona.org/progress/indicators/attainment/?indicators=State::Arizona::All,County::Maricopa%20County::All>
- ▶ “Occupation Table.” Lightcast. Accessed on August 27, 2024.
- ▶ These projected job openings by education level are somewhat at odds with the latest educational attainment data for Maricopa County. Approximately 16.5% of residents over the age of 25 have earned a bachelor's degree, and 8.8% have attained a graduate or professional degree. Additionally, 11.4% have an associate degree, and 27.8% have completed some college without earning a degree. About 23.6% of the population are high school graduates, while 4.9% have attended some high school but have not graduated, and 2.9% have less than a ninth grade education. <https://maricopaeda.com/educationalattainment/>
- ▶ U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. “Educational Attainment.” American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1501, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1501?q=educational%20attainment> Maricopa county. Accessed on September 27, 2024.
- ▶ <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/04013>
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- ▶ This data refutes the college-for-all claim within the “Billions to Gain” report which states that, “Postsecondary education almost certainly causes higher earnings.” According to complete wage data (not excluding dropouts, stopouts, and the certificated) it doesn’t.
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- ▶ March 2019, EMSI, *The Economic Value of the Maricopa County Community College District: MAIN REPORT*.
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- ▶ National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/>
- ▶ The 5 E's are adapted from Rachael Mann (educator, author, CatapultMasterclass.com speaker, and 2002 Top 30 Global Gurus)
- ▶ <https://www.acteononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Arizona-CTE-Fact-Sheet-April2023.pdf> 44

A large, stylized orange chevron pointing to the right is centered on a yellow background. The background features the text 'A FASTER WAY FORWARD / A FASTER WAY FORWARD' repeated twice in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, once above the chevron and once below it, creating a circular effect.



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