Closing the skills gap, opening career options

Mix of new state laws, programs and diploma requirements aim to expand career and technical education in schools

Over the past two years, a big change has occurred in high schools across the state of Kansas. More and more students are getting a head start on their future careers and their postsecondary studies — by enrolling in and completing courses in career and technical education, or CTE. The rates of growth in the state are striking.

Since the 2011-2012 school year, participation in college-level technical education courses has more than doubled, as has the number of students earning industry-recognized credentials and the number of college credit hours earned.

Why the change? In large part, it is because of SB 155, a bill passed unanimously by the Legislature in 2012. That bill led to a new state-funded program that has greatly expanded high school students’ access to college-level technical-education courses.

Across the Midwest, new state laws on CTE are being passed, new programs are being launched, and new investments are being made. It is a policy area that enjoys bipartisan support and that touches on many of today’s top legislative priorities — closing skills gaps, expanding economic opportunities and improving student outcomes.

“Workforce development and training programs are critical, but they’re insufficient by themselves,” says Kate Blosveren Kreamer, associate executive director for the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium. “There is a real efficiency and value in embedding more workforce training into the K-12 system.”

Last year, she says, nearly every U.S. state took actions of some kind on career and technical education. CTE was also a top legislative priority.

“I can’t overstate the importance of these programs,” South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard told lawmakers at the start of their legislative session, adding that the high costs of CTE courses often prevent local schools from offering them. His solution: A new grant program to expand the availability of career and technical education across the state — for example, money for high schools to open new CTE programs in machining, welding and science; to offer dual-credit courses in agriculture; or to partner with another to build mobile CTE facilities.

And several laws have been passed by the region’s legislatures in 2014, including measures in Indiana and Michigan that either rework state graduation requirements or pave the way for future changes.

“If you look at Indiana’s diploma system, it’s one-size-fits-all,” Indiana Republican Rep. Wendy McNamara says. “It’s the idea of everybody going to a four-year institution, but statistics show that isn’t where every student needs to be.”

One of her ideas is to create a new option for Indiana high school students: the CTE diploma. Her bill calling for the state to study that option was signed into law earlier this year (HB 1213). Michigan’s HB 4465 and 4466, signed into law in July, will allow students to meet certain graduation requirements by completing CTE courses and programs.

Across the Midwest, states are taking a closer look at how to improve career and technical education and get more students involved in CTE. Programs a new grant program was launched in Kansas, while South Dakota has started a new CTE grant program. This year, too, the Indiana and Michigan legislatures passed new laws on graduation requirements and the opportunities for students in the Midwest.
Health & Human Services

Debate over safety of triclosan sparks new bills in region; Minnesota first state to ban it

As federal regulators take a closer look at the safety of triclosan, a substance found in many personal-care products, lawmakers in at least two Midwestern states are making moves to keep the substance out of homes and waterways.

Triclosan is an antibacterial ingredient commonly used in personal-care products such as liquid soap, toothpaste and deodorant. Manufacturers maintain that the material is safe, and its use in consumer products is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. But controversy has erupted over whether triclosan truly is safe. Critics cite animal studies showing health effects ranging from skin irritation to disruption of reproductive hormones, and that the chemical accumulates in the body over time.

The debate over triclosan has also focused on whether the chemical affects water quality or damages aquatic ecosystems; scientific studies have identified it in underwater sediment. (The Canadian government has designated triclosan toxic to the environment.)

What’s more, some critics point out that according to the FDA, antibacterial soap has not been proven to be more effective at reducing organisms such as salmonella and E. coli. Medical experts warn, too, against the general overuse of antibacterial products and medications because they could cause common pathogens to mutate, leading to stronger, antibiotic-resistant organisms.

In response to the debate, some major manufacturers of health and beauty products (such as Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson) have voluntarily removed triclosan from some products and have pledged to stop using it altogether in the next two years.

And the FDA has proposed new rules that would require companies to submit data proving their antibacterial body cleansers are safe for daily use (or otherwise reformulate the product) and that they are more effective than regular soap (or otherwise remove “antibacterial” from the label).

Meanwhile, state legislatures around the country have considered legislation banning triclosan-containing products from store shelves. This year, Minnesota became the first state to do so. SF 2392, which takes effect in 2017, prohibits the sale of cleaning or personal-care products containing triclosan. Last year, Gov. Mark Dayton announced that state agencies would no longer purchase such products.

Legislation banning triclosan-containing products was also considered in Iowa this year. SF 2346 would have banned the sale or manufacture of soap, hand sanitizer or toothpaste containing triclosan beginning next year. The bill did not advance.

Triclosan is just one of the chemicals that state policymakers are focusing on eliminating from common products. In Michigan and Minnesota, proposed bills call for devising lists of “chemicals of concern,” such as carcinogens, endocrine disrupters and other toxic materials.

The lists could be used to help prioritize efforts to ban chemicals and require manufacturers to disclose the presence of substances deemed highest-risk.

Great Lakes

Bacteria counts at Great Lakes beaches often exceed national safety standards, study shows

The millions of people going to a Great Lakes beach might not see and probably don’t want to think about the E. coli bacteria present in the freshwater system’s near-shore waters.

But the bacteria are there — and sometimes at counts that exceed a standard for swimmer safety set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Bacteria counts, in fact, are more likely to be higher on a beach in the Great Lakes than in any other coastal region of the country, according to “Testing the Waters,” a June report by the Natural Resources Defense Council. The study was based on a survey of nearly 3,500 beaches in 30 different states.

Thirteen percent of the water samples taken at Great Lakes beaches exceed the Beach Action Value, the EPA’s most protective benchmark for swimmer safety. That compares to the national average of 10 percent.

Karen Hobbs, co-author of the study’s Great Lakes section, cites a number of reasons why communities and states struggle to protect beach water quality: for example, the loss of streams and wetlands (“nature’s sponges” that remove pollutants and retain stormwater) and outdated wastewater systems used by large metropolitan areas near the lakes.

She adds that the problem could only worsen with the region’s changing climate.

If, as predicted, extreme storms become more frequent and intense, there could be more incidents of water systems being overwhelmed and raw sewage and storm run-off flowing into the Great Lakes. “Testing the Waters” notes, too, that the problem of beach-water contamination is not spread equally among the eight Great Lakes states.

In Michigan and Minnesota, respectively, only 6 percent and 8 percent of the water samples from the states’ beaches failed to meet the EPA benchmark.

In contrast, Ohio ranked last among the 30 states. More than one-third of the samples from its beaches were above the Beach Action Value. “Lake Erie is the shallowest of the Great Lakes, and all of that water just sits there,” Hobbs says in explaining the high failure rate for Ohio.

The state also has lost 90 percent of its wetlands (second-highest rate in the nation), has a large amount of agricultural runoff, and has coastal cities with inadequate infrastructure for handling wastewater and stormwater.

But some promising new practices to better protect water quality are also coming from Ohio. For example, in a first legislative step to curb nutrient runoff from the state’s farms (a cause of algal blooms in Lake Erie), SB 150 was signed into law this year. It requires farmers, starting in 2017, to be trained and certified before applying fertilizer to their land.

Meanwhile, under a consent decree with the U.S. EPA, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District is investing in a $3 billion, 25-year plan to reduce raw sewage discharges from 4.5 billion gallons a year to 494 million gallons. The plan includes the construction of large-scale tunnels and improvements to existing treatment plants.

It also calls for a greater use of “green infrastructure” tools — such as rain gardens, green roofs and permeable pavements that, as Hobbs says, “capture the rain where it falls.”

In Wisconsin, increased use of green infrastructure is central to the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District’s goal of having no sewer overflows by 2035. At the state level, Illinois lawmakers approved a bill (SB 2780) this year expanding the types of loans that can be issued through the Clean Water Revolving Fund. The aim of the measure is to encourage local investments in green-infrastructure projects and water efficiency.
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Use of ‘big data’ in agriculture yields big benefits and privacy concerns for producers

For farmers and ranchers, the promise of “big data” to vastly improve operations is hard to ignore. Take, for example, the idea of “prescriptive production.” By merging a decades’ worth of fertilizer, climate and yield data with advanced soil maps and existing conditions, a producer can make more-informed management decisions — down to the fertilizer used and seeds planted on each acre of land. Evidence shows that this approach can increase yields by between 10 and 25 percent.

“Big data” is the term applied to the sorting and processing of enormous quantities of data. And the ability to crunch massive amounts of data may be as important to the future of food production as the development of the tractor was for 20th-century agriculture.

But it is also hard to ignore the myriad policy and privacy issues arising from increased use of “big data.” Imagine, for instance, the value of yield data from 1,000 combines or 1,000 cattle ranches across the country to the traders of agriculture futures.

Should farmers have a say and be compensated when their data are used by others? What type of data should state and federal regulators — and private companies, for that matter — have access to on specific farmland and producers’ agricultural operations?

These policy questions remain largely unanswered. The implications of “big data,” of course, extend well beyond the agriculture industry, and state legislatures across the country are taking notice.

In Minnesota, Sen. Scott Dibble says he wants lawmakers to better understand the topic and gain the expertise they need to make informed policy decisions. This year, he introduced and helped pass SF 2066, a bill that creates an eight-member legislative commission whose charge will be to “review legislation impacting data practices, data security and personal data privacy.”

Dibble says enactment of SF 2066 “will provide legislators the time to focus on the thorny, complicated issues related to privacy” — everything from the use of drones to the use of medical and financial data.

“Technology is taking quantum leaps ahead of state legislatures,” says Sen. Warren Limmer, a sponsor of SF 2066. “We just can’t keep up, so this specialized commission focusing on data privacy is definitely needed.”

Current state laws offer some limited protections. Thirty U.S. states have laws requiring businesses to destroy personal information after it has been used, and all states except South Dakota require individuals to be notified if a security breach exposes their information.

This year in Iowa, lawmakers passed AB 2559, which strengthens notification requirements when a data breach occurs. Minnesota HB 183, meanwhile, limited unauthorized access to data by public employees.

For the most part, though, state and federal laws are silent on how agricultural data can or cannot be used. Several agriculture companies and farm organizations are working on policies to clarify the control and dissemination of data related to farmers’ agricultural practices and operations — for example, soil type, the use of fertilizer, herbicide and seed, and the resultant yield.

One idea is to specify in farm-equipment contracts that data cannot be sold or given to others. And universal guidelines on data ownership and licensing would make data-services contracts easier to understand.

Another privacy concern involves the commercial use of unmanned aircraft in agriculture and forestry. The Federal Aviation Administration is set to approve the practice, but only one Midwestern state, Illinois, has passed legislation requiring consent when gathering data about a landowner’s property below navigable airspace.

Economic Development

New tool on industry clusters seen as way for states to improve economic-growth strategies

Where are information technology jobs most concentrated? How is automotive job growth shifting across the nation? What areas specialize in businesses related to food processing? This kind of data is now available through a new web-based initiative (http://cluster.us) from the U.S. Economic Development Administration and the Harvard Business School.

“Cluster mapping is an easy-to-use tool to aid in state and regional economic development,” says Lee Munnich of the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School.

“The economic prosperity of a state or region is closely linked to the performance of its ‘traded clusters’ — those that serve markets in other regions or nations.”

An economic cluster is defined as a geographic concentration of interconnected businesses, suppliers and related organizations. The presence of clusters helps make regions uniquely competitive in terms of jobs, investment and business development, according to the EDA.

Munnich adds that the mapping data on clusters can be used not only to understand the competitive strengths of a state or region, but also to implement an economic development strategy. That is because economic drivers such as entrepreneurship and innovation are often tied to a region’s already competitive clusters.

This, in turn, allows state lawmakers to make more-informed decisions on how and where to invest in everything from infrastructure to tax incentives. Munnich notes, too, that lawmakers can use the tool to better align their higher education systems with workforce demands — for example, ensuring that local postsecondary schools have degree and training programs that reflect the needs of an area’s industry clusters.

In announcing the new web-based tool, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker said it should “provide businesses and organizations with the data and strategies they need to capitalize on their region’s assets.”

State policymakers are among those that could benefit from a better understanding of the economic clusters within their own borders, Munnich says.

Top 10 industry ‘traded clusters’ in Midwest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>High employment specialization and share</th>
<th>High employment specialization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production technology and heavy machinery</td>
<td>Illinois, Ohio</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processing and manufacturing</td>
<td>Illinois, Wisconsin</td>
<td>Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive</td>
<td>Indiana, Michigan, Ohio</td>
<td>Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downstream metal products</td>
<td>Illinois, Ohio</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing services</td>
<td>Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulcanized and fired metals</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trailers, motor homes and appliances</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Ohio</td>
<td>Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastics</td>
<td>Illinois, Michigan, Ohio</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalworking technology</td>
<td>Illinois, Michigan, Ohio</td>
<td>Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting and electrical equipment</td>
<td>Illinois, Wisconsin</td>
<td>Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lee Munnich, University of Minnesota

Brief written by Laura Tomaka, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee. She can be reached at tomaka@csolg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Indiana Rep. Bill Friend and Minnesota Rep. Rick Hansen.

Brief written by Carolyn Orr, staff liaison to the Midwestern Legislative Conference Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee. She can be reached at corry@csolg.org. The committee’s co-chairs are Indiana Rep. Bill Friend and Minnesota Rep. Rick Hansen.
In Midwest, states split on whether legislating should be part- or full-time

In Michigan, the state’s legislators meet year-round, earn among the highest legislative salaries in the nation, and get support from a staff of more than 700 people.

For a time earlier this year, some inside the Capitol wondered if that might all soon change. A petition drive to make Michigan a part-time legislature — with much lower staffing levels and legislative pay, along with session days limited to 60 days per year — was being pushed with plans to put it on the ballot later this year.

That drive has since stalled, though supporters of the change have vowed to continue to seek wider support statewide. And the recent activity in Michigan beg the question: Is one model, part-time legislature or full-time legislature, better than the other? According to Gary Moncrief, a Boise State University political science professor and expert on state legislatures, it all depends.

“States with complex economies and large, diverse populations develop more-complex problems that require a great deal more information and policy development, which are the hallmarks of a full-time legislature,” he says.

“On the other hand, I do not believe that all states require a full-time legislature — far from it.”

The Midwest is currently split. Four states — Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin — are classified as having “full-time legislatures” based on three principal factors: higher salaries for legislators, sessions that run for all or most of the year, and large staffing levels. Indiana, Kansas, North Dakota and South Dakota are among the 17 U.S. states still operating under part-time legislatures. Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska have what are considered “hybrid” legislatures.

The arguments being made for a change in Michigan reflect those often heard across the country in favor of part-time, “citizen” legislatures: cost-savings through smaller legislative budgets, for example, and the advantage of having lawmakers who spend more time in their districts and who are not “career politicians.”

Michigan Rep. Amanda Price adds that the effort in her state has been fueled by groups of people “who believe that a full-time legislature has led to over-regulation and over-taxation of citizens in Michigan.”

“The thought of a part-time legislature may be attractive to some in that it could save tax dollars or reduce the size of government,” Price says. “However, it is important to point out that the bureaucracy would remain in place without as much oversight from elected representatives who can voice people’s concerns.”

Moncrief agrees.

“I have never understood why some legislators want to weaken the legislative institution — which is certainly closer to ‘the people’ than the executive or the judicial institutions,” he says.

“Weakening the legislature simply makes the executive branch relatively stronger, and I imagine it makes interest groups relatively stronger as well.”

Supporters of full-time legislatures say a state benefits from having elected officials with the time and means to devote to the business of lawmaking, and who are less likely to have conflicts of interest stemming from outside jobs.

Moncrief notes, too, that a change in Michigan would be especially challenging because of the state’s very restrictive law on term limits — two three-year terms in the House and two four-year terms in the Senate, with bans on ever returning to the Legislature.

“The evidence is pretty clear that state legislatures with term limits have lost influence vis-à-vis the executive branch,” he says. “To further weaken the institution by ‘de-professionalizing’ [less staff, for example] seems dangerous to me.”

In his most recent book, “Why States Matter,” Moncrief and co-author Peeverill Squire argue that gridlock in Washington, D.C., is shifting more power and responsibilities to the states, with legislatures being given more freedom to innovate and more latitude to exert their own policy preferences.

“If that is true, why would we want to be weakening the policy capacity of legislatures?” Moncrief asks. “I think we should be making state legislatures more capable, not less so.”

### Salaries for state legislators in Midwest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>$67,836 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>$24,140 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>$25,000 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>$88.66 a day during session (plus $7,083 for off-session expenses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>$57,685 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>$31,140 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>$12,300 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>$4513 a month, plus $162 a day during session and $7,083 for off-session expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>$60,584 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>$56,000 a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>$49,943 a year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSG Midwest

### State rules governing length of session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Statutory or constitutional limits in place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>No limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>April 29 (odd-numbered years); March 14 (even-numbered years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Not specified, but calendar usually set to adjourn when per diem ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>None in odd-numbered years; 90 calendar days in even-numbered years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>No limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>120 legislative days per biennium (or first Monday after third Sunday in May)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>90 days in odd-numbered years; 60 days in even-numbered years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>80 legislative days (meets once every two years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>No limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>40 legislative days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>No limit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSG Midwest

### Capital Closeup

**Article written by Laura Tomaka, who can be reached at ltomaka@csg.org. Capital Closeup highlights institutional issues in state governments. Articles are available at www.csgmidwest.org.**
Most states in the region have a private license system for the sale of alcoholic beverages. Private enterprises, including liquor and grocery stores, apply for a license to sell alcohol. The licenses are granted at the discretion of the licensing authority in the state.

Three states in the region — Iowa, Michigan and Ohio — are called control states. None of these states operates retail liquor stores, but they do control the sale of distilled spirits at the wholesale level.

In Iowa, the Alcoholic Beverages Division sells spirits to private retailers, while wine and beer are sold by private companies. Michigan and Ohio operate the same way: Distilled spirits are wholesaled by the state and sold privately; wine and beer wholesaling are handled privately.

More than half the states in the region have an appointed board or commission that oversees alcohol regulations and enforcement.

In states without boards or commissions — Kansas, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin — oversight duties are handled by other state agencies. The departments of revenue provide this function in Kansas, South Dakota and Wisconsin. In Minnesota, enforcement duties lie with the Department of Public Safety, and in North Dakota, these duties are split between the attorney general and the Tax Commission.

One of the most important functions of the oversight process is the review and issuance of licenses to sell alcohol. In some states this is done by state authorities, while in others, the local government issues licenses or controls the number that can be issued.

State regulations cover the days and hours that alcohol may be sold, but some local governments may add other restrictions.

States tax alcohol sales both through excise taxes, which are collected from the producer or distributor (not directly from the consumer), and through sales taxes, which are paid by the consumer.

Excise taxes per gallon of distilled spirits range from $35.22 in Washington state to $1.87 in West Virginia. Michigan, a control state, has the Midwest’s highest markup on alcoholic beverages (see table), and Illinois has the region’s highest excise tax rate. Kansas and North Dakota have the lowest excise tax rates, at $2.50 per gallon.

The general sales tax applies to distilled-spirits sales in most Midwestern states. Kansas has a 10 percent retail tax on purchases that are taken off-premises, nearly four percentage points higher than the general sales tax.

In Minnesota, there is a gross receipts tax of 2.5 percent for the purchase of alcoholic beverages in addition to the general sales tax. North Dakota has a 7 percent sales tax on the gross receipts of the sale of alcoholic beverages, two percentage points higher than the general sales tax rate.

### Midwestern states’ excise tax rates on alcoholic beverages, per gallon (as of Jan. 1, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Distilled spirits</th>
<th>Wine</th>
<th>Beer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>$8.55</td>
<td>$1.39</td>
<td>$0.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>$2.68</td>
<td>$0.47</td>
<td>$0.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>$1.75</td>
<td>$0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>$2.56</td>
<td>$0.30</td>
<td>$1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>$1.91</td>
<td>$0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>$3.93</td>
<td>$0.30</td>
<td>$0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>$3.75</td>
<td>$0.95</td>
<td>$0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td>$0.50</td>
<td>$0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio *</td>
<td>$3.38</td>
<td>$0.32</td>
<td>$0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>$3.93</td>
<td>$0.93</td>
<td>$0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>$3.25</td>
<td>$0.25</td>
<td>$0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* State directly controls sale of distilled spirits. In Iowa, there is a 50 percent markup on distilled spirits; in Michigan, there is a 65 percent markup plus three additional 4 percent taxes on the marked-up cost.

Sources: Federation of Tax Administrators and CSG Midwest research
More emphasis on career and technical education in Indiana, Kansas, and Michigan

example, instead of completing an Algebra II course, a student could complete a program in electronics or welding that has similar mathematics content.

The recently enacted measures also ensure that Michigan students and parents are made aware of the ability to create a “personal curriculum” built in part around CTE programs and courses.

‘Game-changing’ law in Kansas

While attracting more interest than usual in recent years, career and technical education has long been a part of state K-12 and postsecondary systems.

CTE is offered by traditional high schools as well as area career centers or academies (school districts often partner with one another to offer CTE). Michigan and Ohio have separate “planning districts” that focus on the delivery of career and technical education for a particular region of the state.

For postsecondary students, a state’s community and technical colleges provide CTE programming. In addition to using their own dollars, states rely on federal funding, via the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, to pay for local CTE programs (see article and map on page 7).

But as Blosveren Kreamer notes, states have recently shown more interest in opening up new funding streams, with Gov. Daugaard’s actions from this year being one notable example.

The recent CTE trends in Kansas, too, would not have been possible without the increased investment made by the state Legislature.

“I think it really is game-changing legislation,” Blake Flanders, the Kansas Board of Regents’ vice president for workforce development, says of SB 155.

The reason, he adds, is the incentives that the state-funded program is now providing schools and students.

Community and technical colleges are encouraged to seek out and recruit students because the state pays the tuition. High schools, meanwhile, can receive $1,000 for every student who earns an industry-recognized credential in a “high-need, high-wage” occupation area. School districts also have the costs of transportation picked up by the state.

For students, this has led to greater access to college-level CTE courses.

“For the past, it was perceived that if you went through a vocational program, then you weren’t going to college at all — and perhaps you might be destined for a job that didn’t have Fantastic wages,” Flanders says. “But because this is linked to certification in high-demand areas, there’s been much more discussion about some great career opportunities.”

Not to mention the link to postsecondary schools.

“In Kansas, we’re going to need more individuals with some postsecondary credential,” he says, “but not necessarily a postbaccalaureate degree.”

Every year, the Kansas Department of Labor is charged with developing a list of “high-need, not necessarily a postbaccalaureate degree.”

Recent state actions and innovations in the Midwest on career and technical education (CTE) policy

In the Kansas town of Pekin, a partnership between the local high school and area businesses exposes students to the skills and careers associated with high-tech manufacturing. Part of the training is done by veteran manufacturing employers — who would have been prohibited from teaching under revisions to the state’s teacher-licensure law. But the legislature intervened in 2013 by passing HB 1868, a bill that provides flexibility so on-the-job training can occur in high school, the more will help keep “a pipeline of qualified employees coming out of our schools into the workforce,” says Vise President for Workforce Development, says of SB 155.

Under bipartisan legislation signed into law last year (SB 4653, B Bomberg established new regional “Works Councils” across the state. Each council evaluates employment opportunities and workforce needs in a specific region of the state. It then tailors career and technical education programs so that young people can meet those local opportunities and needs. A total of 11 Works Councils — made up of local employers and educators — were established. The Indiana General Assembly also created a 15-member Career Council (HB 1862) to coordinate statewide career training and skills development.

Expanding the reach of state-funded apprenticeship programs emerged as a top legislative priority in Iowa this year. The result was passage of HB 2460. It provides $3 million for a new Apprenticeship Training Program and $3 million for a Job Training Fund. The new state investment will be used by businesses and the state’s community colleges. The goal is to help students “earn while they learn,” Gov. Terry Branstad says, while also providing employers with a greater pool of skilled workers.

Two years ago, Kansas lawmakers passed SB 155, a measure that paved the way for an innovative approach to promoting CTE and expanding its reach. The Excel in Career Technical Education Initiative has in fact been so successful — via the program’s efforts are being studied by other states — that lawmakers recently expanded the program to include students who went to high school or are now employed in the workforce.

In Minnesota, high school students in high school programs in Michigan will soon have more opportunities to explore career pathways and a skills-based curriculum as the result of two bills signed into law this summer (HB 4465 and HB 4466). Under these new measures, certain graduation requirements in math and other subject areas can be met in part by taking CTE courses. For example, instead of completing an Algebra II course, a student could complete a program in electronics that has similar mathematics content. Or a course in agricultural science could be used to fulfill a science graduation requirement. The bills also ensure that students and parents are made aware of the ability to create a “personal curriculum” built in part around CTE courses and programs.

Last year, Minnesota lawmakers eliminated a high-stakes test that students had to pass to graduate from high school. They have instead placed a greater emphasis on new assessments tied to college and career readiness. Part of HB 630, too, requires school districts to assist students, starting in the ninth grade, in developing a plan for postsecondary education or employment. The components of this “personal learning plan” were tweaked in 2014 following recommendations made by a 15-member Career Pathways and Technical Education Advisory Task Force.

Since 2009, North Dakota has funded career and technical education scholarships of up to $6,000 per student. To be eligible, a student must have a GPA of 3.0 or higher and complete a required program of study. But unlike with another state academic scholarship, the student does not necessarily have to score a 24 or higher on the ACT. Instead, a young person qualifies for the CTE scholarship by achieving high scores on the WorkKeys assessment, which measures “real-world” skills that employers believe are critical to job success.

Last year, the Ohio Department of Education released new report cards designed to improve accountability among the state’s joint vocational school districts. The “career tech” report cards are designed to be the first in the nation to use A to F letter grades and to exceed federal requirements. Letter grades are given in three areas: four-year and five-year graduation rates (proportion of career-tech students who graduated within four and five years of beginning ninth grade) and post-program placement (the proportion of students who were enrolled in postsecondary education, advanced training or military service or who were employed within six months of leaving high school). The Ohio Legislature required the report cards under a bill passed in 2012 (SB 316).

Gov. Dennis Daugaard has made CTE a central part of his focus on improving workforce training, what he calls “WIRI” (pronounced “WIRE” Workforce Initiatives). Earlier this year, he announced the awarding of $6.5 million in new grants to 12 different school districts to either develop CTE programs or strengthen existing ones. The funds will be used to build new regional CTE facilities, create mobile units for use by multiple districts, and expand course offerings in middle school and high school.

Last in 2013, two bills related to career and technical education were signed into law in Wisconsin. The first, SB 334, is modeled after Kansas’ Excel in Career Technical Initiative (see Kansas section). It provides a school district with $1,000 for every high school student who earns an industry-recognized certificate in a high-need occupation prior to his or her graduation. SB 334 creates a new technical education scholarship program; criteria for the scholarship will be established by local school districts.

Sources: National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, Association for Career and Technical Education and CTE Midwest research.
high-wage occupations” that have some type of certification or license.

“Take Algebra II as an example,” she says. “It may not be relevant to students unless they’re going on to calculus in college. Some students might be better served by taking a problem-solving class or a technical math class. It has advanced math, but is also relevant to a career skill.”

McNamara’s interest in state CTE policy doesn’t only come from her background in education. It’s also because of what she hears time and again from business leaders in her district. Indiana, she is told, has a skills gap — open positions can’t be filled by qualified or skilled workers.

Similar concerns are being raised across the country, and McNamara believes an increased emphasis on career and technical education must be part of the policy solution.

“We are never going to get rid of a skills gap until you actually teach the skills that are missing,” she says.

How do states know which skills to emphasize in CTE programs?

In Indiana, the legislature has created a separate “Works Councils” to find out the answer for different parts of the state. Made up of local employers and educators, these newly formed councils must identify the workforce needs of a community — and then tailor career and work- force programs accordingly.

McNamara says one of the next steps should be making CTE a more attractive and viable option for students as they work toward a high school diploma and begin thinking about what comes next.

“One of the biggest things is changing our minds,” she says. “First, it doesn’t have to be CTE or college. It can be both. Second, we shouldn’t marginalize an associate’s degree or some type of technical certification in favor of a four-year degree.”

Advocates will try again in 2015 to win reauthorization, modernization of key federal law

Eight years have passed since the last congressional reauthorization of a law that drives federal funding and policies for career and technical education.

But an update and modernization may be coming soon, which advocacy groups such as Opportunity Nation say are essential to making the most of the more than $1 billion spent every year through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act.

“We’re hopeful that Perkins will be one of the first things that Congress takes up in January,” says Melanie Anderson, director of government affairs for Opportunity Nation, a group that includes more than 300 businesses, educational institutions, nonprofits and civic organizations.

“This is an area where we know there is a lot of bipartisan agreement.”

Earlier this year, the U.S. Congress overwhelmingly approved a new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which provides close to $3 billion a year to states for job training programs.

The goals of that law, in many ways, mirror the objectives of the Perkins Act — developing a skilled workforce and opening pathways of economic opportunity.

Under the Perkins Act, the federal government sends money to the states for career and technical education, or CTE, in high school and postsecondary institutions.

“...is an education law that has been languishing and not getting the attention it deserves,” Anderson says. “It’s critical to addressing the skills gap. It’s critical to getting our country’s disconnected youth back on a track to success.”

“Disconnected youths” are individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not working. There are an estimated 5.8 million of them in this country — one in seven people in this age group.

A reauthorization of the Perkins Act, Anderson says, should target more funding to communities with high concentrations of disconnected youth. Opportunity Nation also wants new provisions that enhance accountability of CTE programs, encourage more cooperation among secondary and postsecondary education systems, promote innovation, and get local employers more involved in the process. Here are some of its recommendations for improving the Perkins Act:

- Require states to make competitive subgrants under the federal law only to CTE programs that involve partnerships between a local school district and higher-education institutions. The idea here is to ensure that these two levels of education work closely together on a federally funded CTE program of study, which should begin in high school and should end with a student either being able to earn a postsecondary credential or industry certification.
- Establish a common set of performance measures across states. For CTE programs, measures of performance center on an array of student outcomes — for example, the percentage of participants who graduate from high school, become industry-certified or successfully transition to a postsecondary program or prosper in the labor market. Federal grants could be ended for local programs not meeting the performance measures, while funding priority could be given to initiatives that can demonstrate success.
Indian Rep. Tim Brown
Physician ran for legislature 20 years ago with goal of shaping health policy, and has since emerged as key leader on tax policy

by Kate Tormey (KateTormey@cg.org)

D r. Tim Brown had long considered running for public office.
But in the beginning, he didn’t imagine it would be at the state level — in part because of his passion for health policy.
“I would have said you were crazy if you thought I would run for state representative,” he says. “I thought, ‘It doesn’t pay very well, it takes up a lot of your time, and all of the action is at the federal level. Why not just run for Congress?’”

But things began to change in the late 1980s, he recalls, and so did his thinking about the impact he could have in the Indiana legislature.

More and more decisions were being left up to the states, which, in turn, were becoming laboratories of policy reform.
Brown, a doctor in central Indiana, began testifying at the Indiana Statehouse as part of a nationwide conversation about health care reform. And he soon saw a way to contribute to his state.
“No one [in the legislature] had a clue about what it was like to be on the front lines of delivering care and how it affects people on a day-to-day basis,” Brown says. So he decided to bring that perspective to the legislature, successfully running as the Republican candidate for an open House seat in 1994.

He lives in Crawfordsville, about an hour west of Indianapolis. Raised in rural Illinois, Brown eventually settled in Indiana to practice after medical school. He is board certified in family medicine and currently works in the emergency department of a small critical-access hospital.
“One of the things that physicians are taught early on is listening and trying to empathize through reflective questioning,” he says. “That is part of the skill set I also use as a legislator: putting myself in other people’s shoes.”

In addition to his longtime work on health care policy, Brown serves as chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Since taking that leadership post, Brown has had two goals: balance the budget and adjourn on time. (Both were accomplished in 2013.) This year, during leadership post, Brown has had two goals: balance the budget and adjourn on time. (Both were accomplished in 2013.)

The Healthy Indiana Plan was created with a Medicaid waiver, so in a way it’s making Medicaid “bigger and more dysfunctional” — but at least we are putting some consumer [responsibility] into it.

In Indiana, it affects different counties at different levels. Revenue [from the tax] is used for local expenditures at the county and city level. We have some counties where 1 or 1 ½ percent of their property tax on business equipment.

So we started looking at an example in Vermont, which in 1992 started a local option.

We made it such in Indiana: It would be up to the local governments to decide [whether to] eliminate this tax for new investment in business property. It won’t change for existing businesses, and some said that was part of the downside — if you have a business that’s been here for 80 years, you are penalizing them. But if they bring in new equipment, they will have the same advantage as a new business coming in.

Can you talk about the legislation that was passed this year regarding equipment taxes for businesses?
In Indiana, we tax businesses “personal property” and have a very convoluted schedule about how we depreciate it, and whether local governments can abate it. If you look at some of the studies, we were falling behind the rest of the country in competitiveness on this tax.

In Indiana, it affects different counties at varying levels. Revenue [from the tax] is used for local expenditures at the county and city level. We have some counties where 1 or 1 ½ percent of their

What is your take on the federal Affordable Care Act as a way to solve the nation’s health care challenges?
I think it is going to be very difficult for a centralized, top-down solution to work, because health care is so individual and unique to every situation.

Medicaid, by definition, is very dysfunctional; providers don’t like it, patients don’t like it, and it’s a bureaucratic nightmare and headache. … My opinion is that we are taking a very dysfunctional system and making it bigger and more dysfunctional. That is, in essence, what we have done during my time in the legislature; we have tweaked the rules of Medicaid. Fundamentally, I think there needs to be reform to Medicaid.

What would be your top reform on the path to reducing health care costs?
In health care, a small percentage of the patients account for a lion’s share of the costs.

At our children’s hospital in Indianapolis, 5 percent of the cases account for 85 percent of the costs. We had a mental health center in Bloomington cite the same statistics. So if we could manage and control that 5 to 10 percent of cases — [which lead to] $5 to $99 percent of the costs — in a highly integrated management system that is a public-private partnership, we could leave the other 90 percent of the people alone and start to bend this cost curve.

Last year, I introduced a bill to look at a case-management system for this high-cost population. The Insurance Committees evaluated it and it’s going to be studied this summer. I think there is an opportunity here for states to be the laboratories of innovation and change; let us look at high-utilizing, very sick people. If we could get them to the right person to get the right treatment when they need it, I think we could give better, more cost-efficient care. Meanwhile, we are creating all kinds of rules and regulations for the other 90 percent [of patients], when we could [instead] be focusing on this 10 percent and do a much better job.
Wisconsin legislators look to solve growing problem of student loan debt

Sponsors call aid bill a ‘win-win-win’ that would boost economy

by Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason (Rep.Mason@legis.wi.gov)

Borrowers are facing a perfect storm of rising tuition, restrictive law that forbids loan refinancing, and declining federal and state support for higher education.

Borrowers are a two-pronged approach whereby we work to help entering and current students as well as provide meaningful debt relief for the hundreds of thousands of borrowers who have long since finished their educations, but not paid for paying them. We must pursue

We must pursue

Submissions welcome

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of The Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any FirstPerson article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tanderson@csg.org.

Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason, a Democrat from Racine, was first elected in 2006.

References:

1. Student loan debt of 4-year college graduates in Midwestern states, class of 2012.
2. Rankings of 7 states for 49 (lowest) include District of Columbia; totals for 4-year institutions.
3. Borrowers, economy would both benefit

Debt woes increasingly common

These are just a few of the hundreds of Wisconsin residents who shared their student loan debt stories after my colleague, Sen. Dave Hansen, and I introduced the “Higher Ed, Lower Debt” bill (Assembly Bill 498). These residents are among the nearly 40 million Americans now saddled with over $1.2 trillion in student loan debt. It is estimated that in Wisconsin alone, more than 753,000 residents have federal student loan debts; even more have private loans. These Wisconsin residents have obtained their educations but are still facing years, even decades, of loan payments. This has dramatic implications for their own family finances, as well as for Wisconsin's economy: families are renting instead of owning their homes, driving used instead of new cars, not saving as much as they'd like for their retirement or their children's education, and spending less in their local economy on consumer goods. Student loan borrowers in Wisconsin and nationwide are facing a perfect storm of increasing tuition, restrictive federal law that does not allow loan refinancing, and declining federal and state support for higher education. I authored the Higher Ed, Lower Debt bill to provide an

innovative, state-level solution to this growing problem. Since I was elected to the state Legislature in 2006, I have worked to make college more affordable by urging and supporting efforts for more funding of financial aid for higher education. Wisconsin's primary source of state-funded financial aid is known as the Wisconsin Higher Education Grant, which for years has had stagnant grant amounts and growing waiting lists. Funding for WHEG runs out long before all eligible students can claim their grants. I have seen my proposals for increased grant funding fail on party-line votes numerous times. While I was pleased to support a tuition freeze for University of Wisconsin students this year (and am glad to see it will continue next year), it is clear that increasing financial aid or reducing costs for entering students, while important, fails to help those borrowers who are already out of school. Sixty percent of student loan debt in our country is held by people over 30. We must pursue

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Overview of caucus programs and services for legislators

- Legislative trackers and newsletter — The caucus keeps members updated on legislation in Washington, D.C., and state and provincial capitals. The legislative trackers are available at www.greatlakeslegislators.org. An electronic newsletter is also sent to members four times a year.

- Great Lakes, Great Webinars series — The caucus regularly holds free one-hour web-based seminars on key Great Lakes issues. Please visit www.greatlakeswebinars.org for information on upcoming events.

- In-state policy workshops — The caucus has held policy workshops in Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota and is planning to sponsor events in other jurisdictions in 2014 and 2015. The goal of these workshops is to generate discussion on more about issues in Great Lakes protection and restoration and to strengthen the policy role of state and provincial legislators.

- Advocacy on key Great Lakes issues — The caucus has written letters to federal officials urging changes to the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and swifter action to prevent the introduction of Asian carp into the lakes.

- Annual caucus meeting — The caucus meets annually to explore key Great Lakes issues and examine the policymaking role of states and provinces. Please contact Lisa Janairo (ljanairo@csg.org or 920.458.5910) for information.

The Council of State Governments was founded in 1933 as a national, nonpartisan organization to assist and advance state government. The headquarters office, in Lexington, Ky., is responsible for a variety of national programs and services, including research, reference publications, innovations transfer, suggested state legislation and interstate consulting services. The Midwest office includes 12 officials from the following states and provinces: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan are MLC affiliate members.

Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason to lead Great Lakes caucus; Executive Committee in place

Wisconsin Rep. Cory Mason has been elected to serve as chair of the binational Great Lakes Legislative Caucus in 2015 and 2016. The election took place at the caucus’s July meeting in Quebec City, an event that attracted a bipartisan group of legislators from all of the Great Lakes basin’s states and provinces.

Joining Mason as an officer will be Michigan Sen. Darwin Boocher, who will again serve as vice chair. Minnesota Sen. Ann Rest, current chair of the caucus, will continue her leadership role in the organization as a member of its Executive Committee. Here is the list of Executive Committee members for 2015 and 2016 (the member from New York is pending):

- Indiana — Sen. Ed Charbonneau
- Ohio — Rep. Dan Ramos
- Ontario — Speaker Dave Levac
- Pennsylvania — Rep. Curt Sonney
- Quebec — MNA Gay Ouelllette

Through its mix of programming, advocacy and activities, the caucus provides a forum for the regional exchange of ideas and information on key Great Lakes issues. Its goal is to strengthen the policy role of state and provincial legislators.

The caucus, for example, has facilitated regional discussions on passage and implementation of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact. It has advocated for federal funding of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, an improved Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, and a federal study to plan for Asian carp from the eight U.S. states and two Canadian provinces in the Great Lakes basin.

In the basin, and discussed the plans of the Wisconsin city of Waukesha (which lies outside the basin) to divert Great Lakes water so it can be used for drinking water.

Membership in the nonpartisan caucus is free and open to all state and provincial legislators in the 10 Great Lakes states and provinces. The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments provides staffing services for the caucus, which is funded by a grant from the Joyce Foundation.

Toll Fellows class includes 12 officials from Midwest

Twelve Midwestern state policymakers have been chosen to participate in CSG’s Toll Fellowship Program this year. One of the nation’s premier leadership-development programs for state government officials, Toll brings 48 participants from all three branches of state government to Lexington, Ky., every year for a six-day “intellectual boot camp.”

This year’s class from the Midwest includes seven state legislators (see photos below). The other five Toll Fellows are:

- Sara Buschman, assistant deputy secretary for the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families;
- Bradley Cruff, a district judge in North Dakota;
- David Michael Gormley, a municipal court judge in Ohio;
- Trevor Jones, cabinet secretary for the South Dakota Department of Public Safety; and
- Lynne Valenti, cabinet secretary for the South Dakota Department of Social Services.

The Toll program typically includes sessions on leadership, media training and crisis management. It fosters personal growth and assessment while also giving participants the chance to learn from and network with other state officials. Applications for the 2015 program will be available in October.

Toll Class of 2014: State legislators from the Midwest

Jewish Rep. Deborah Berry
Wisconsin Rep. Jill Billings
Kansas Sen. Elaine Bowers

Nebraska Sen. Lydia Brasch
Illinois Rep. David Harris

Indiana Rep. Jud McMillin
Indiana Sen. Karen Tallian

Archives of more than nine decades of data are also available online

The Council of State Governments continues a long tradition of "sharing capitol ideas" with the publication of the 2014 edition of "The Book of the States.

Since 1933, CSG has served as a resource for state leaders as well as a catalyst for innovation and excellence in state government. "The Book of the States" helps further that mission by providing relevant and timely policy information, as well as comparative data, for all 50 states, commonwealths and territories of the United States.

This signature CSG publication is the reference tool of choice for state leaders, scholars and researchers. It is the preeminent source of state-by-state data on topics ranging from health care to fiscal issues; it also covers all three branches of state government in great detail.

The 2014 volume includes more than 160 in-depth tables, charts and figures illustrating how state government operates.

It also includes 30 articles from state leaders, noted scholars and CSG’s own policy experts that analyze and report on the transformations taking place in state government: from trends in economic development policy to the implications of federal greenhouse-gas regulations on the states.

CSG policy analysts mined more than 500 sources to obtain the information shared in "The Book of the States."

In addition to a bound reference volume, CSG also offers a digital archive — dating back to 1935 — as part of its online Knowledge Center (knowledgecenter.csg.org). Each of the volumes is available in its entirety, including articles and tables of data that can be downloaded and customized.

To order a hard copy of "The Book of the States," visit www.csgstore.org or call 800.800.1910.

Regional rail commission gathers state transportation leaders for policy summit

CSG Midwest supports group that advocates for improvements to rail network

Advocates for improving this region's passenger rail service took part in a policy summit earlier this summer organized by the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (CSG Midwest provides secretariat services for the commission.)

The meeting featured a trip on a portion of Amtrak's "Southwest Chief" (which runs from Chicago to Kansas City), one of the national rail operator's long-distance routes. During the train ride, commissioners were briefed on the history and current status of Amtrak's long-distance service, which is funded at the federal level.

The group later held a summit in Kansas City's Union Station, where commissioners discussed plans for passenger rail development at the state and federal levels.

Attendees discussed the operation of "corridor" routes, which are less than 750 miles in length and funded by states. Representatives from state departments of transportation provided updates on current passenger rail service and the status of improvements to state-supported routes in this region.

In addition, the chairs of MIPRC’s committees reported on two ongoing projects: an initiative to highlight the impact of rail suppliers on our region’s economy and a survey of universities located near passenger rail stations.

The commission also elected leaders for fiscal year 2015, deciding to keep its three current officers in place. Tim Hoeffner, director of the Michigan Department of Transportation’s Office of Rail (and Gov. Rick Snyder’s designee to the commission) will serve as MIPRC chair, Joan Bray, a former state legislator and Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon’s designee to the commission, will serve as vice chair. Kansas Sen. Carolyn McGinn will serve as financial officer.

A full agenda from the June meeting and presentations are available at www.miprc.org.

A report commissioned by MIPRC, "Amtrak's Long-Distance Trains: Brief History, Benefits, Infrastructure Challenges" is also available online.

The commission supports a nine-state compact charged with promoting, coordinating and supporting passenger rail development in the region. Members include state legislators and gubernatorial designees from each member state. The commission’s next annual meeting will be held in fall 2015 in St. Paul, Minn.

For information about the commission, or to receive periodic updates on passenger rail issues, contact MIPRC’s director, Laura Kliewer, at kliewer@csg.org.
In Wisconsin and Ohio, new calls and bills to repeal Common Core

Earlier this year, Indiana became the first U.S. state to opt out of Common Core education standards, and the repeal movement continues to attract interest in other Midwestern states as well.

In July, Gov. Scott Walker called on legislators to replace Common Core “with standards set by people in Wisconsin.” In Ohio, meanwhile, hearings began being held on HB 597, a measure that would block the use of Common Core. In its place would be K-12 standards in English, language arts and math that are “not dependent” or “related to federal control,” according to the bill. Walker’s statement and Ohio’s HB 597 reflect one of the concerns raised over Common Core — that it codifies local control to a set of standards pushed by the federal government. Voluntary acceptance of Common Core, for example, has been one way for states to secure U.S. Department of Education waivers and grants.

Supporters of Common Core, however, note that it has been a state-driven initiative, one based on model state standards and led by two multi-state organizations. Its goal is to establish “clear and consistent learning goals” in kindergartens through the 12th grade. Most states in the Midwest have adopted Common Core, with the exceptions being Indiana, Minnesota and Nebraska. (Minnesota has adopted the standards for English-language arts, but not for math.)

Federal court case spurs proposals on contraception access

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the retailer Hobby Lobby, which sought an exemption on religious grounds from the federal mandate to cover contraception in employee health plans. Some state policymakers have expressed concern about the legal precedent of eliminating coverage for what they consider a basic preventive health need for women.

Minnesota and Ohio are among the states in which lawmakers have since announced or introduced legislation regarding contraceptive coverage. The proposals would require employer plans that offer prescription coverage to include all federally approved contraceptives and devices. (Minnesota policymakers would provide an exception to this mandate for nonprofit religious institutions, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reports.)

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 28 states (including Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin) already have similar requirements. Of those states, however, 20 — including Illinois — allow certain insurance companies and employers to request an exemption. This year in Illinois, lawmakers approved a non-binding question for November’s ballot; it will ask voters whether insurers that offer prescription coverage should be required to include birth control.

Medical marijuana law expanded in Illinois, adopted in Minnesota

A year after it joined the growing list of states that allow for the medical use of marijuana, Illinois has modified its law to provide relief for children who suffer from seizures.

SB 2636 will take effect at the start of next year. It permits children under 18, with a parent’s consent, to be treated with non-smokable forms of medical marijuana. The state’s original law did not include seizures, including those characteristic of epilepsy, among the list of debilitating medical conditions that could legally be treated with medical marijuana.

Earlier in the year, Minnesota joined Illinois and Michigan as the third Midwest state to allow for the use of medical marijuana. Under Minnesota’s new law (SF 2470), the cannabis will be made by two in-state manufacturers and distributed at eight different facilities. Unlike Illinois and Minnesota, which rely on state-regulated manufacturers and dispensaries, Michigan allows patients to grow their own marijuana or to purchase it from regulated caregivers.

In all, close to half the U.S. states have legalized medical marijuana, but those laws vary on who should cultivate and dispense it, what the limits on possession should be, and what medical conditions should qualify.

In most of Midwest, economic growth is outpacing the nation’s

Economies in most of the 11-state Midwest grew in 2013 at a rate that eclipsed the national average, with the strongest growth continuing to occur in parts of the Great Plains region.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis released the inflation-adjusted data on gross domestic product in June. As it has done for each of the last four years, North Dakota topped the nation in GDP growth. Its 9.7 percent increase between 2012 and 2013 was fueled in large part by growth in its oil and gas industry. But agriculture has also been a large contributor to economic expansion in North Dakota and other states. Between 2012 and 2013, the “agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting” sector was the largest contributor to GDP growth in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin. With the exception of Wisconsin, those states’ overall economies grew at a faster rate than the U.S. rate of 1.8 percent.

Illinois had the lowest GDP growth in the Midwest, 0.9 percent (42nd in the nation). Ohio’s increase was the same as the U.S. average. Indiana (2.1 percent) and Michigan (2.0 percent) had the largest rates of growth in the Great Lakes region; thanks in large part to more economic activity in their manufacturing sectors.