

Pathways After High School

Understanding Where Graduates Go After High School

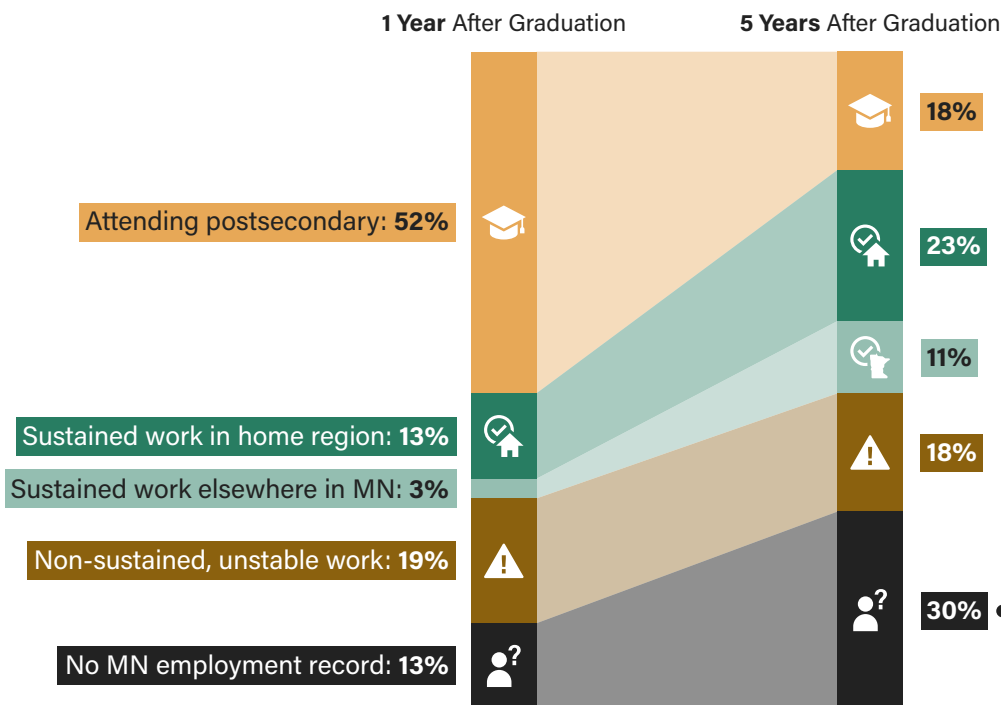
About the Project

This report follows Northwest Minnesota high school graduates for over a decade after graduation, tracking their paths through college, the workforce, or both. When examining the graduates, three distinct pathways emerged: completing college, entering the workforce directly, and persistent disconnection from both. Understanding these separate pathways — not just outcomes — is key to regional workforce planning.

Trajectories After High School Graduation

In the first year after graduation, most students are still in school — over half are enrolled in college. By year five, that balance has flipped: college enrollment drops sharply as graduates move into the workforce. Sustained regional employment nearly doubles over this period, but so does the share with no Minnesota employment record, now the largest single category.

Status of Northwest MN Graduates After High School



POPULATION

580,319 (2026)

NUMBER OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

~60

NUMBER OF COLLEGES

~15

NUMBER OF GRADUATES ANALYZED

65,650 (2008–2023)



No Minnesota employment record

This doesn't mean disconnected from work — it means invisible to Minnesota's data. Northwest Minnesota borders North Dakota, and nearby four-year schools and employers just across that line pull in graduates whose work Minnesota can't see. Some unknown share of this group is working across the border, not truly disconnected.

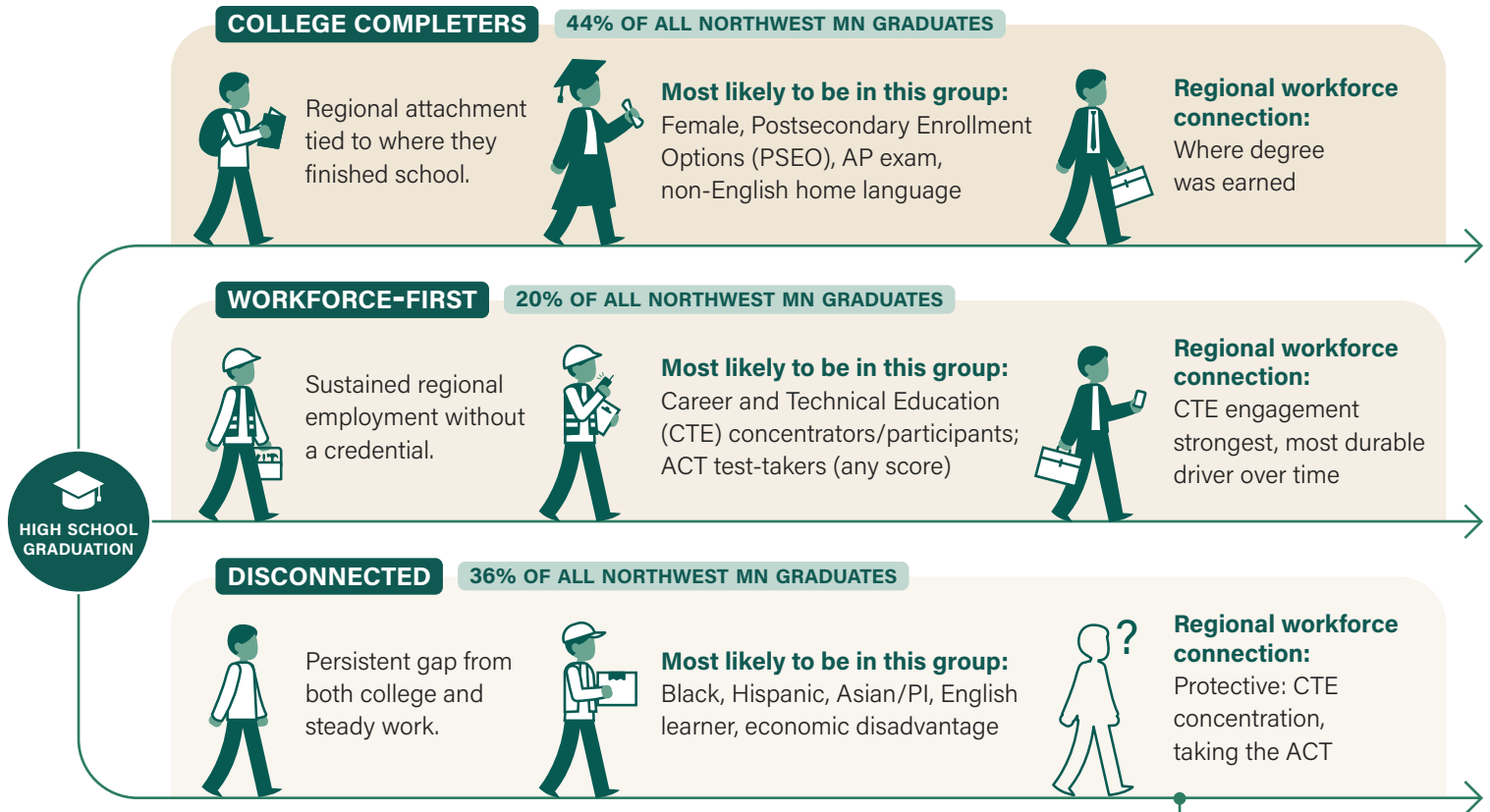


Northwest Minnesota's path from high school to the workforce isn't broken, but it isn't balanced either.

For some, the road to a stable job is clear. For others, the barriers are structural — and easy to miss if you're only looking at one moment in time.

The Pathways

Beyond outcomes, we examined which characteristics were most associated with each pathway — who completes college, who finds steady regional work without one, and who experiences long-term disconnection, along with what protects against it.



These pathways aren't separate stories — they connect. The same barriers that lower college completion odds for some groups also raise disconnection risk later, showing up twice rather than resolving. But CTE engagement is the throughline: linked to regional attachment for completers and non-completers alike, and to lower odds of long-term disconnection.

Policy Takeaway

Strengthening regional postsecondary access and CTE programs may do more for retention than any other factor. Connecting disconnected graduates to the same programming and stronger post-high-school pathways could extend that same effect.

Local Disconnection

Disconnection isn't about graduates leaving — most are already here. Over three-quarters of non-completers with non-sustained employment work within Northwest Minnesota.

The opportunity isn't recruitment; it's helping people already working locally move into steadier jobs.



Explore the other four regional reports:
ruralmn.org/pathways-after-high-school



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