

Pathways After High School

Understanding Where Graduates Go After High School

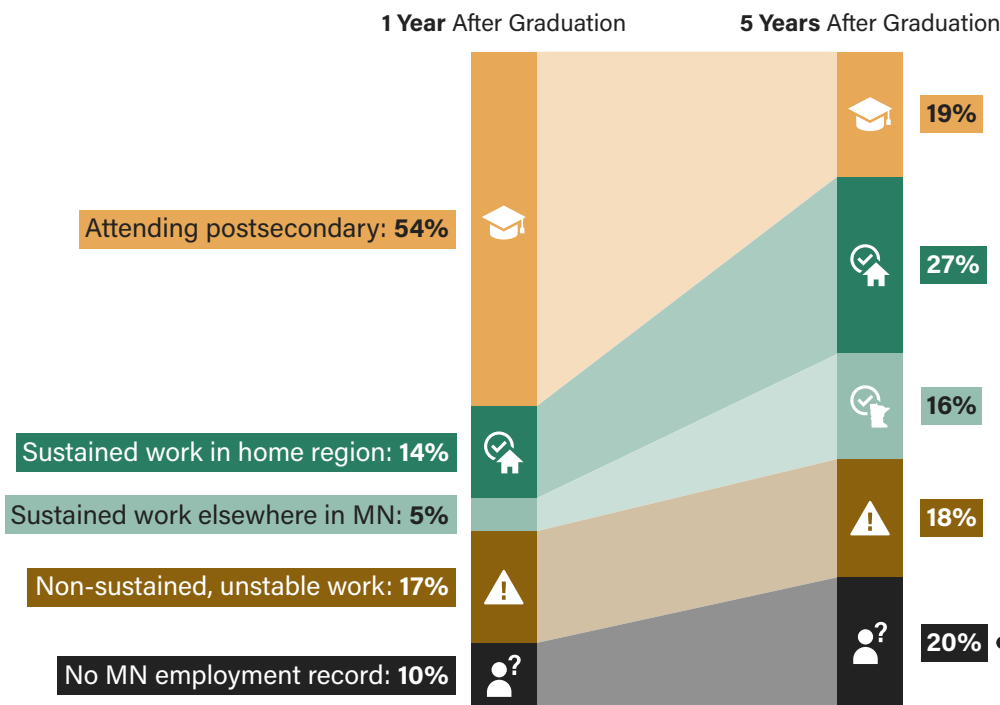
About the Project

This report follows Southeast 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: earning a postsecondary credential, 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, making it the largest single category by year five. The share with no Minnesota employment record doubles as well, to one in five graduates.

Status of Southeast MN Graduates After High School



POPULATION

765,824 (2025)

NUMBER OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

~70

NUMBER OF COLLEGES

~15

NUMBER OF GRADUATES ANALYZED

122,938 (2008–2023)



No Minnesota employment record

By year five, one in five Southeast graduates has no Minnesota employment record. Some are likely working across the Wisconsin or Iowa border, but that explains only a small part of it. Most of this group appears to be genuinely disconnected from work — and identifiable while still in high school.

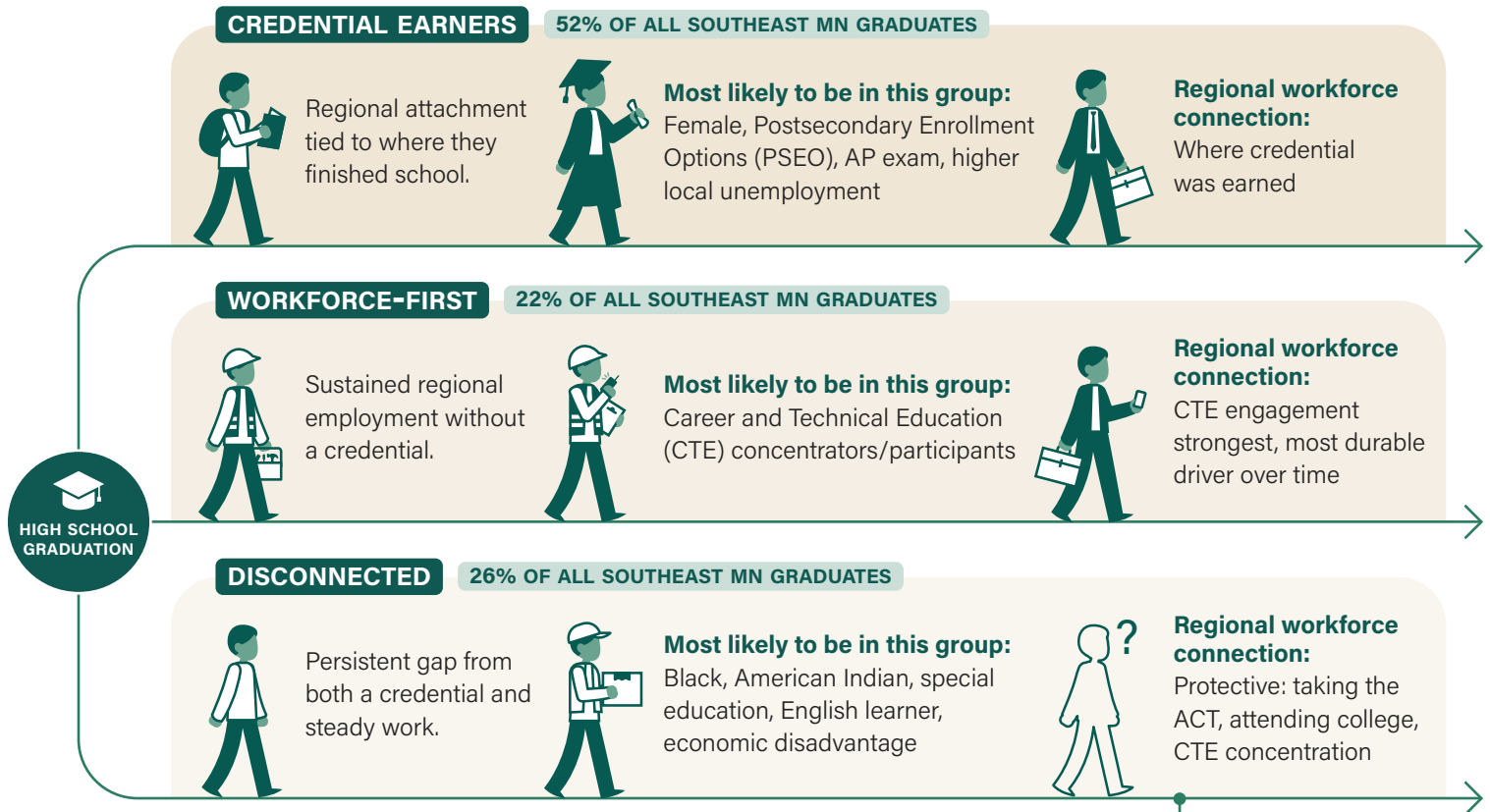


Southeast Minnesota's path from high school to the workforce isn't broken, but it isn't balanced either.

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 earns a postsecondary credential, 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 the odds of earning a credential 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 credential earners and non-credential earners 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. Because most disconnected graduates in Southeast Minnesota appear to be genuinely out of work rather than working across the border, and share characteristics visible while still in high school, earlier connection to CTE and some college exposure could reach them before disconnection sets in.

Local Disconnection

Disconnection isn't about graduates leaving — most are already here. Nearly three-quarters of non-credential earners with non-sustained employment work within Southeast Minnesota.

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



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ruralmn.org/pathways-after-high-school



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