Pathways After High School

Understanding Where Graduates Go After High School

About the Project

This report follows Central 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.



Central Minnesota

POPULATION
821,618 (2025)

NUMBER OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS
~65

NUMBER OF COLLEGES
~10

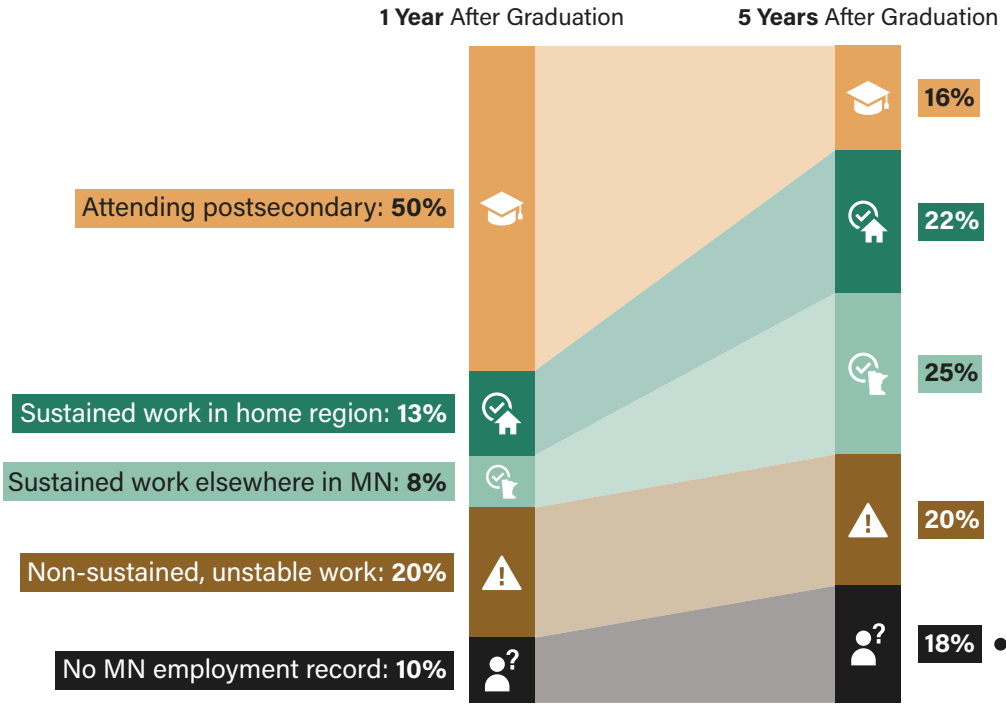
NUMBER OF GRADUATES ANALYZED
137,622 (2008–2023)



Trajectories After High School Graduation

In the first year after graduation, half of the graduates are still in school. By year five college enrollment drops sharply as graduates move into the workforce. Sustained regional employment nearly doubles over this period, while having sustained employment elsewhere in Minnesota triples by year five. Having no Minnesota employment record doubles to nearly one in five graduates.

Status of Central MN Graduates After High School



No Minnesota employment record

By ten years after high school, nearly a third of Central graduates have no Minnesota employment record.

Central Minnesota shares a metro area with Superior, Wisconsin, so some are likely working just across the border. But among graduates without a college credential, this group grows every year and is concentrated among students who can be identified while still in high school — for them, it more often signals real disconnection from work.



Central 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 build on each other — and are 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.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

CREDENTIAL EARNERS

48% OF ALL CENTRAL MN GRADUATES

Regional attachment tied to where they finished school.

Most likely to be in this group: Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO), AP exam takers, female, ACT test-takers

Regional workforce connection: Where credential was earned; fewer than a third finished in the region

WORKFORCE-FIRST

25% OF ALL CENTRAL MN GRADUATES

Sustained employment without a credential, mostly in the region.

Most likely to be in this group: Career and Technical Education (CTE) concentrators/participants, though the seven county metro poaches many of these individuals

Regional workforce connection: CTE engagement strongest, most durable link over time

DISCONNECTED

27% OF ALL CENTRAL MN GRADUATES

Persistent gap from both a credential and steady work.

Most likely to be in this group: Female, Special education, low-income, BIPOC populations

Regional workforce connection: Protective: attending college (even without finishing), CTE participation

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.

Local Disconnection

Unstable work isn't about graduates leaving — most are already here. Three-quarters of non-credential earners with non-sustained employment work within Central Minnesota.

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

Policy Takeaway

Strengthening regional postsecondary access and CTE programs may do more for retention than any other factor. In Central Minnesota, fewer than a third of credential earners finish at a regional college. Attending college — even without finishing — and CTE participation are both linked to lower odds of long-term disconnection. Connecting students to these experiences while still in high school could reach them before disconnection sets in.



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

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