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## SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Alexis Mennis, a senior at Rolling Meadows High School, cares for a patient during her certified nursing assistant apprenticeship at the Greek American Rehabilitation & Care Centre in Wheeling.

# High schools bring the future closer

How Chicago-area school districts are making career pathway programs a centerpiece of secondary education | **BY SALLY DUROS**

**A**lexis Mennis has a light breakfast around 5 a.m. then heads off to the Greek American Rehabilitation & Care Centre in Wheeling, where she works as a certified nursing assistant. After her shift, the Rolling Meadows High School senior goes to a physiology class at Harper College, then wraps up the day practicing with the high school track team.

For Mennis, who aspires to be a surgeon, this is an ordinary day. She's enrolled in Township High School District 214's nationally touted career pathways program, in which all students participate starting in their freshman year. This is also a glimpse into her future. "I've been able to get a jump-start to my career (and get) . . . hands-on experience with patients showing me I

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could do this for the rest of my life," she says. Career pathway programs are all about the rest of a young person's life. They aren't so much a new idea as they are the reinvention of an old one designed to direct high school students toward careers by providing practical experience in a specialized field — before they get their diplomas. For the Illinois secondary education system and an economy in desperate need of skilled talent, an increased emphasis on pathway programs is making this a watershed moment for teens transitioning from high school to the rest of their lives.

Adding to this moment is legislation, HB 3296, signed into law by Gov. J.B. Pritzker in May 2022, which builds on the 2016 Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness Act with two core components: the Postsecondary & Career Expectations Framework and the College & Career Pathway Endorsements. Both are being used across Illinois, but the 2022 law sets new expectations, requiring districts to implement career pathways or the equivalent by July 2025 and apply to the Illinois State Board of Education to offer pathway endorsements beginning with the graduating class of 2027.

In a larger sense, this could be viewed as part of a concept called the "Big Blur," breaking down barriers between high school, college and career to create a sys-

tem that bridges all three.

"There's going to need to be something that goes beyond the high school diploma for (students) to be successful," says Jonathan Furr, founder and executive director of the Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University, or EdSystems, an intermediary that coordinates activities between secondary, higher education and workforce systems, encouraging collaboration. "That's where so much of the policy and the energy work is, at the state level and the suburbs and in Chicago to say, 'How are we better aligning systems so that students in high school can begin along that pathway toward that high-quality postsecondary credential?'"

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