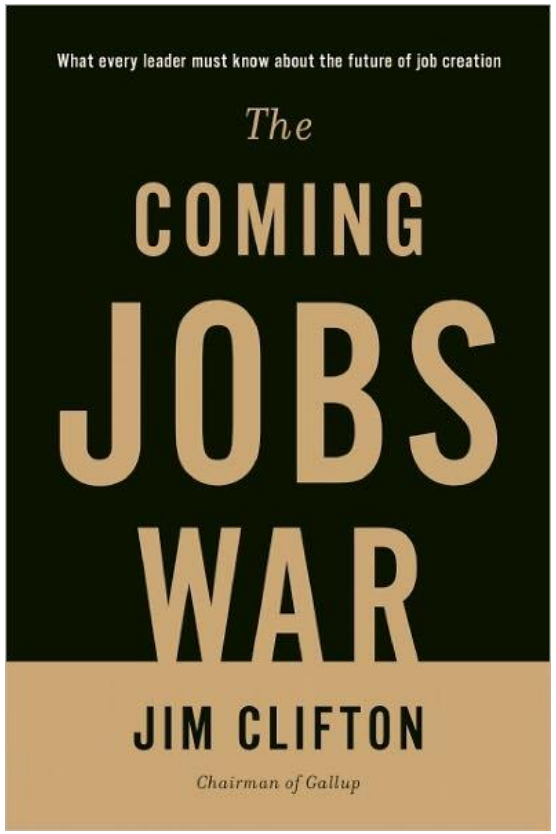
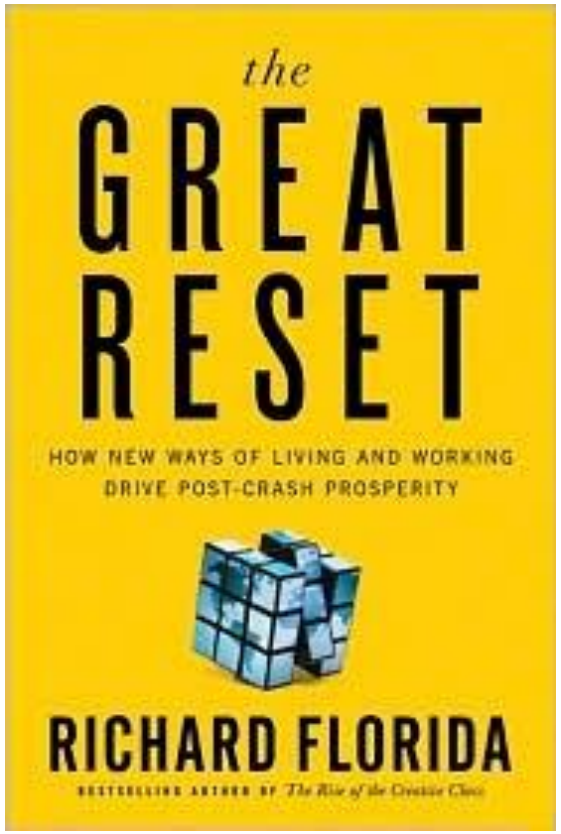
Higher Education's Role in Optimizing Regional Prosperity and Economic Renewal



Dr. Jim Purcell and Dr. Patrick Kelly
Alabama Commission on Higher Education

SHEEO Policy Conference
August 2026





- Density of educated/ skilled workers
- Access to good schools, colleges, universities
- Local leadership
- Regional economic development strategies rather than state-wide strategies
- Return to city-states
  - *Sparta and Athens*
- Work ready communities

Success regional/community economies are differentiated from those that are declining by the talents of its citizenry and its continued willingness to invest in human capital.



Philosophy, Assumptions, and Mindset

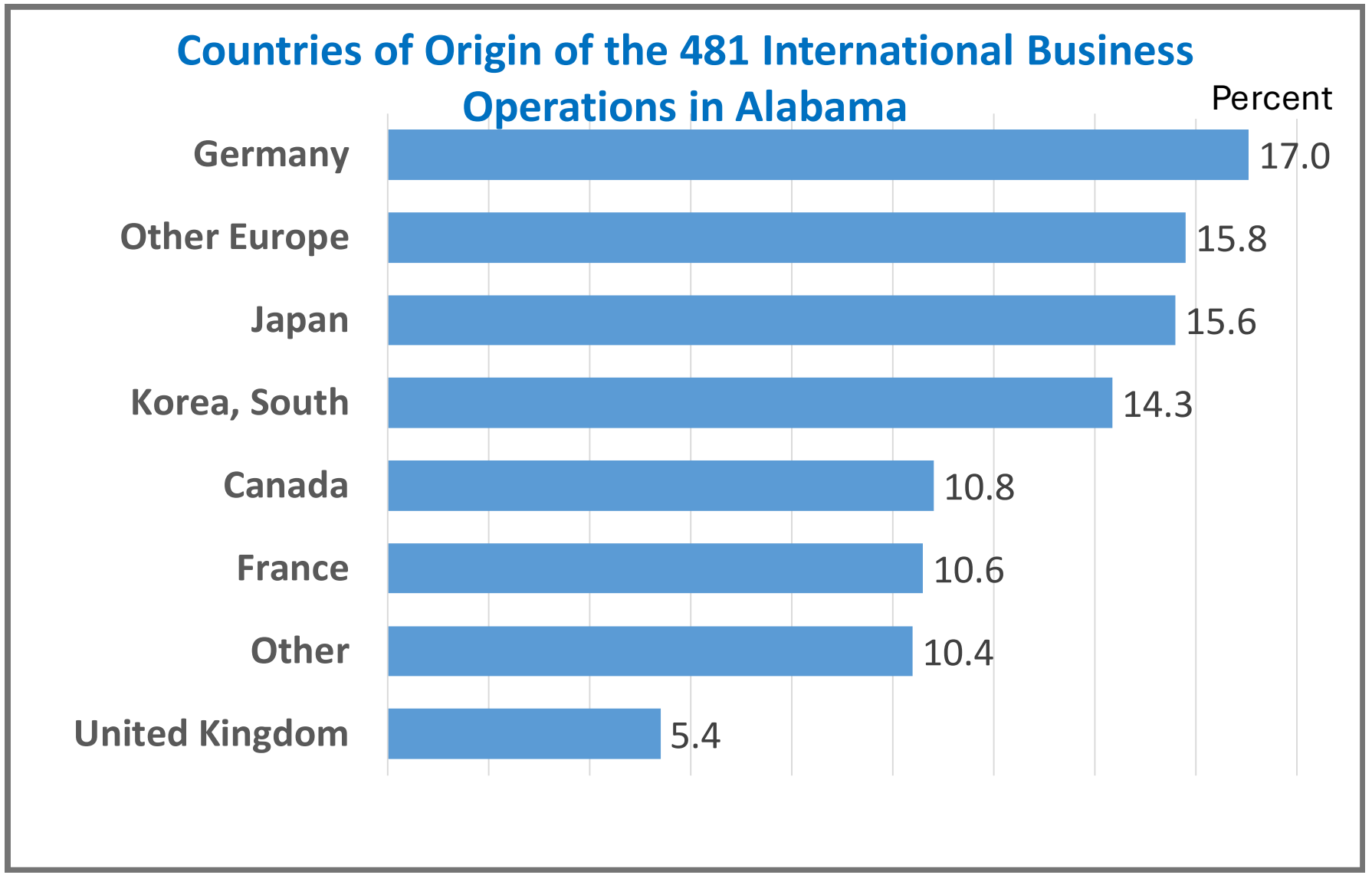
- All politics is local.
- Economic transformation begins where people live, work, and learn.
- The future of the real economy is created community by community.
- State-wide economic and social success starts with local success.
- External facilitation can help move local efforts along.

Most conversations about a community's future are not fruitful because they often shift to competing statistics, personal anecdotes, and hidden agendas.



Alabama's State and Regional Economies

New Economic Realities
Impact of International Investment in Alabama (481 Locations)



Australia
Austria
Belgium
Brazil
Canada
Canadian
China
Colombia
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
India
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Japan
Japan/France
Korea, South
Kuwait
Luxembourg
Mexico
Netherlands
New Zealand
Norway
Saudi Arabia
Singapore
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
Taiwan
Thailand
United Kingdom

EDUCATION & ECONOMIC
ALABAMA INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP


21
First Airbus Aircraft Proudly
Made in the U.S.A.
AIRBUS


AUSTAL
USA




HYUNDAI
HYUNDAI MOTOR MANUFACTURING ALABAMA


Honda Manufacturing of Alabama, LLC


BEST
PLACES
U.S.News
& WORLD REPORT
RANKINGS



Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Alabama (TMMAL)


MAZDA TOYOTA
FIRST ALERT
6:05 | 69°
MAZDA TOYOTA MANUFACTURING PLANT
HUNTSVILLE
WAFF 48
waff.com



Eli Lilly is investing over **$6 billion** to build a massive, 260-acre synthetic medicine facility in Huntsville, Alabama. Expected to be completed in 2032, it will create 450 permanent, high-value roles and produce medicines like the oral, weight-loss pill **orforglipron**.

Jobs: 450 permanent positions (scientists, engineers, lab technicians) with an average salary of $112,700, plus roughly 3,000 construction jobs during the build-out.

U.S. Space Command



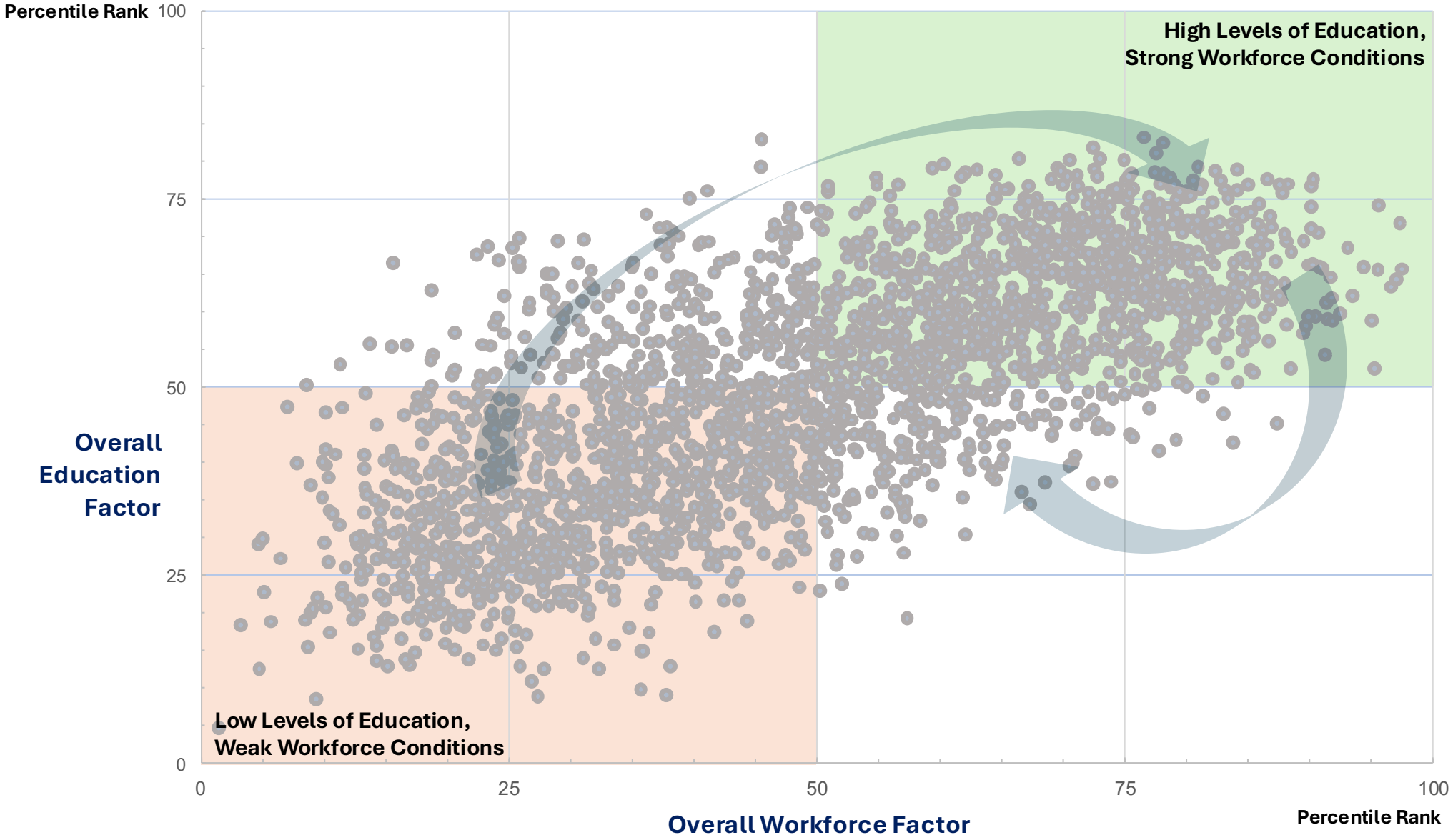
U.S. Space Command Headquarters is moving to Huntsville, Alabama

Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville has been selected as the permanent headquarters for U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM), marking a major milestone in America's strategic defense posture.

The decision follows a thorough, twice-reviewed site selection process that confirmed Huntsville's ability to support the mission's long-term objectives and national security priorities. About 1,400 USSPACECOM jobs will transition to Redstone Arsenal over the next five years. State and local partners have reaffirmed their original commitments made during the original 2020 site selection process.

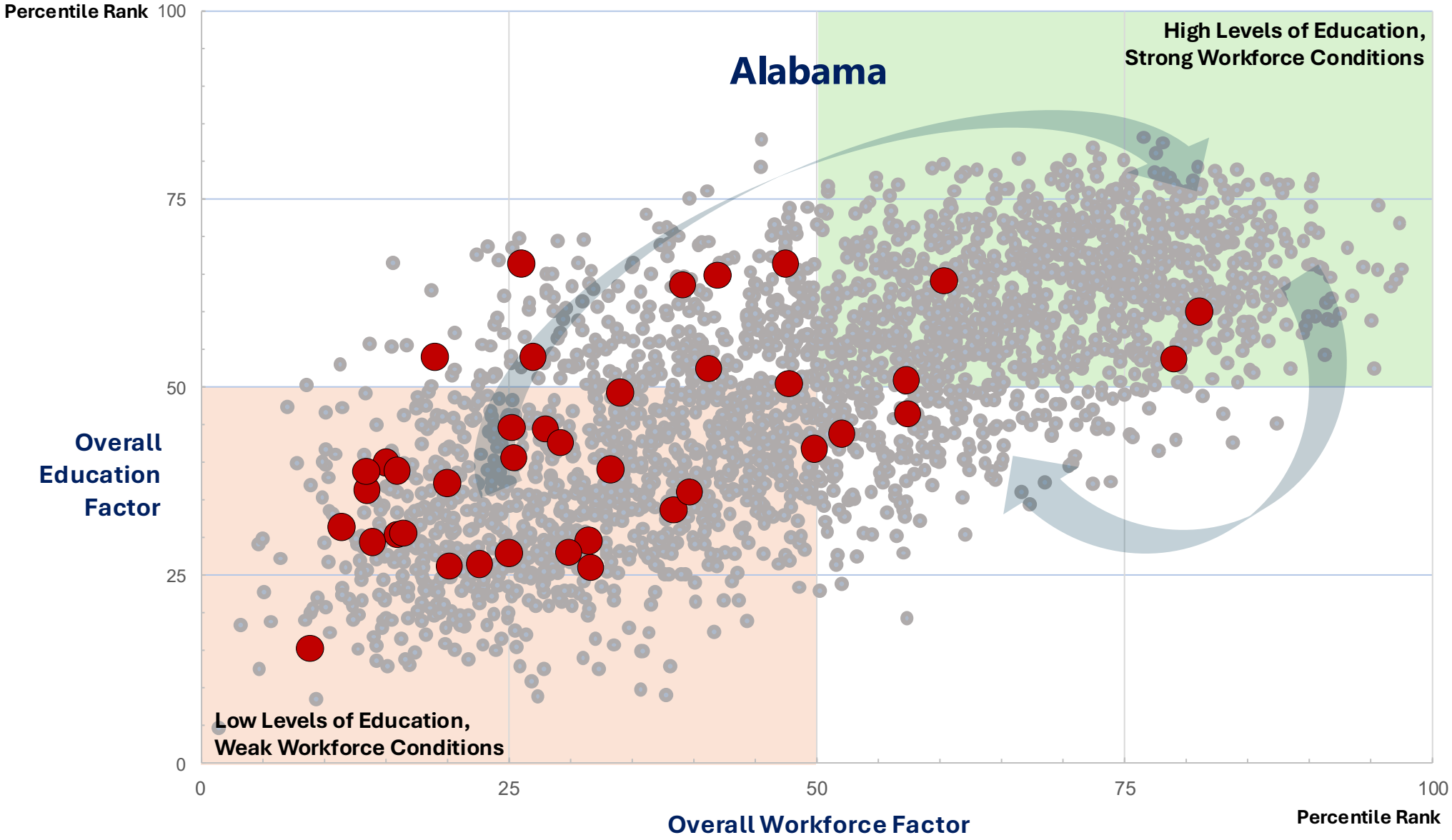
Why regional economic development strategies rather than state-wide strategies?

EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



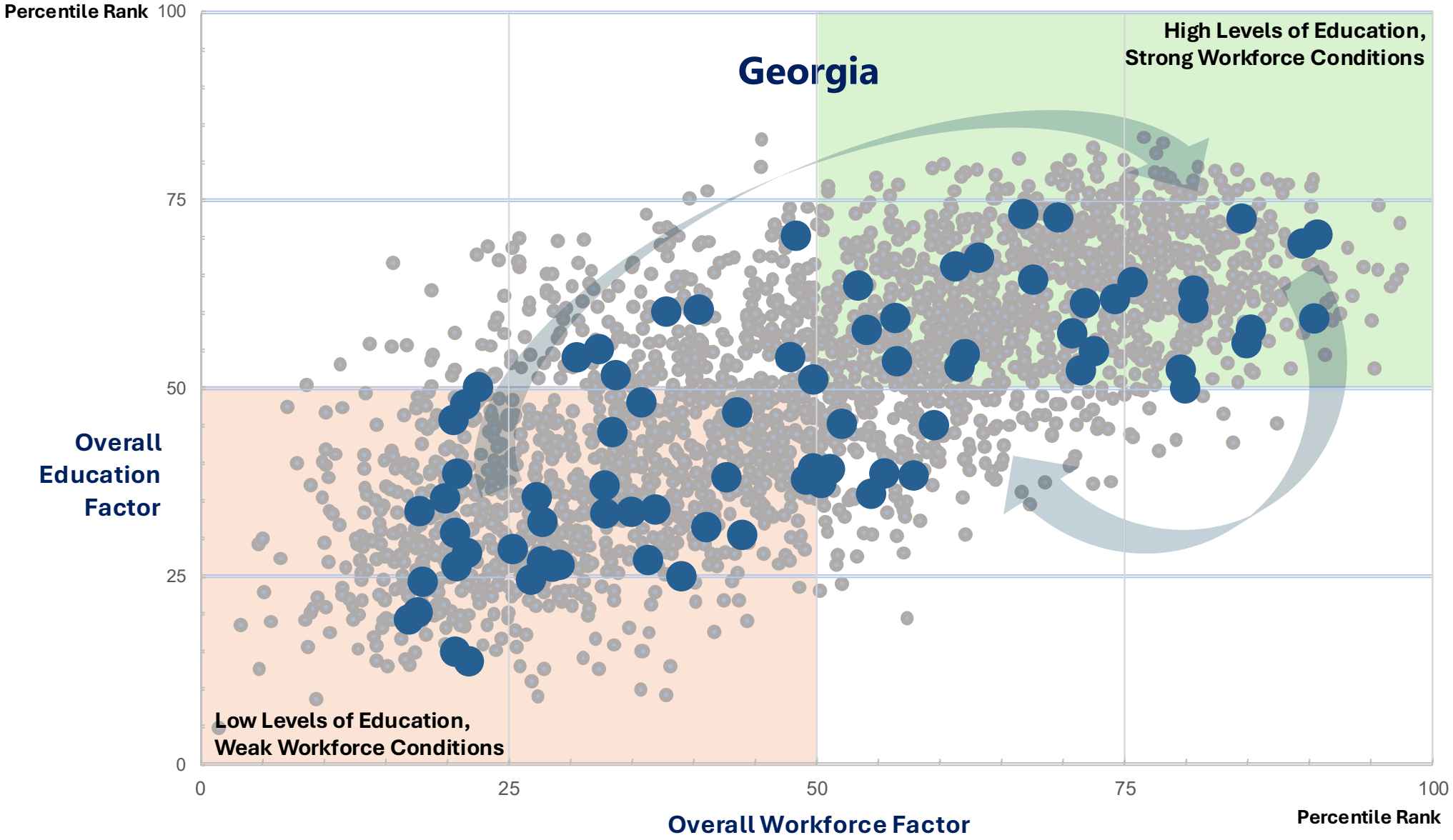
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



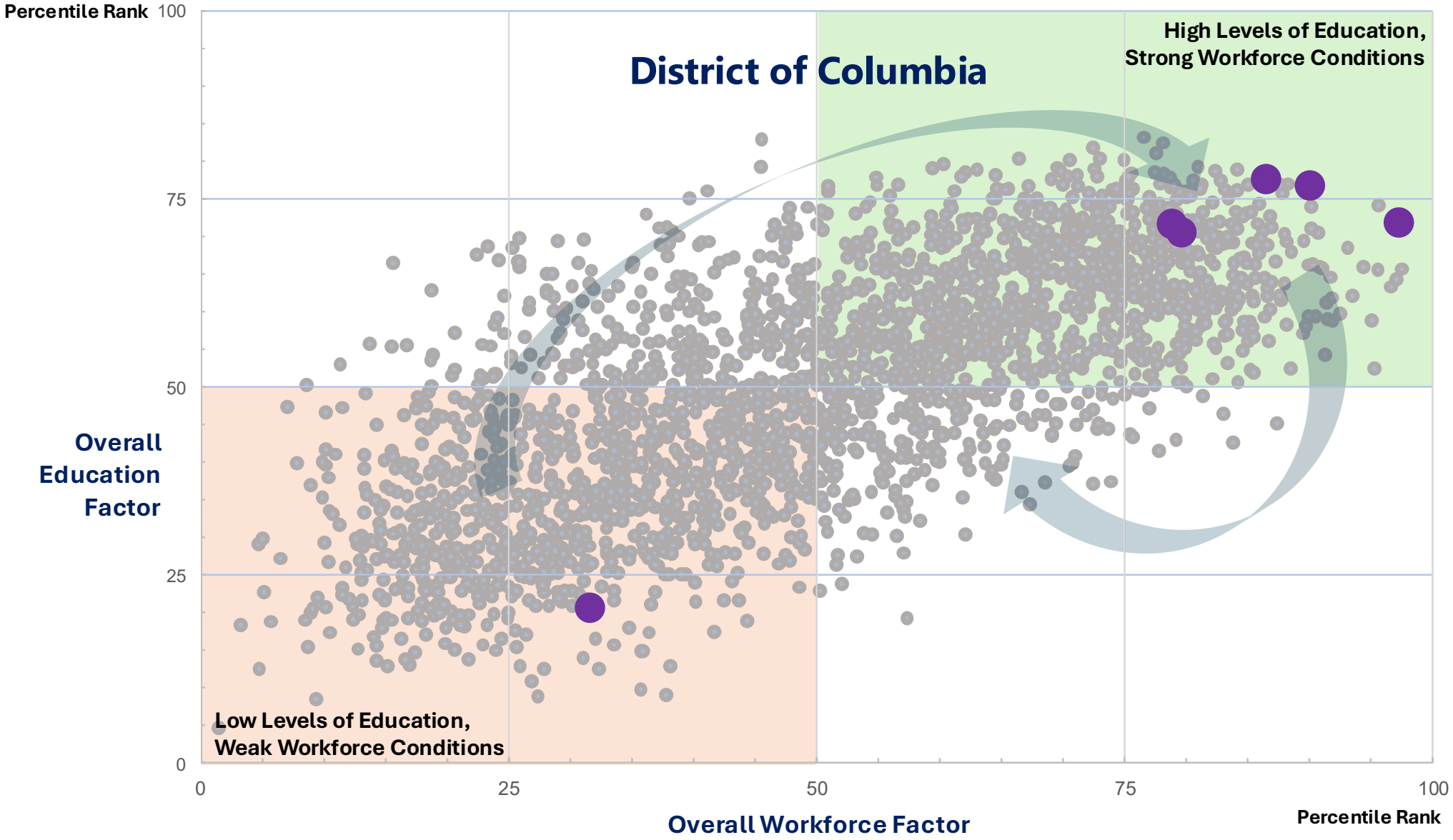
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



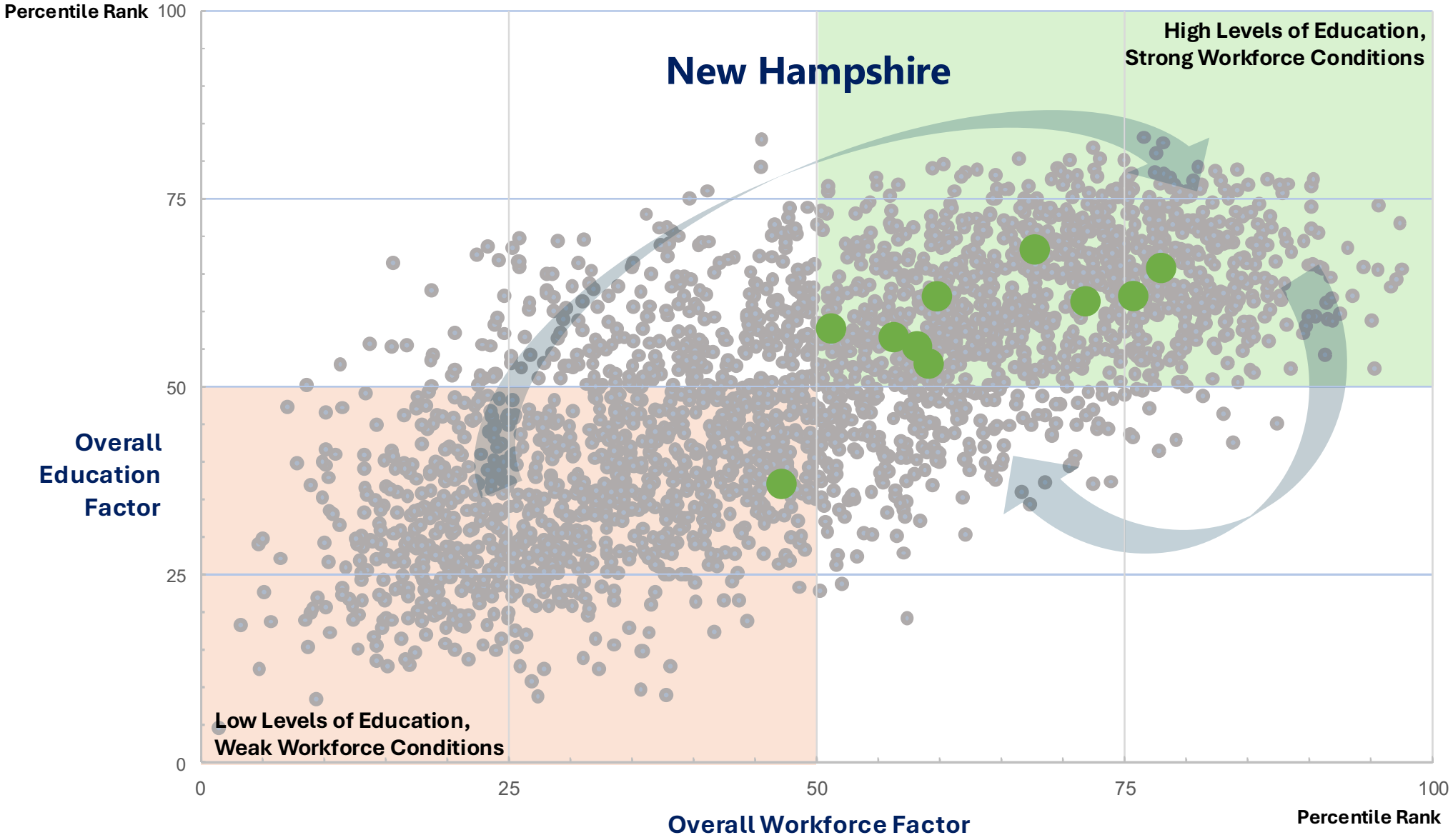
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



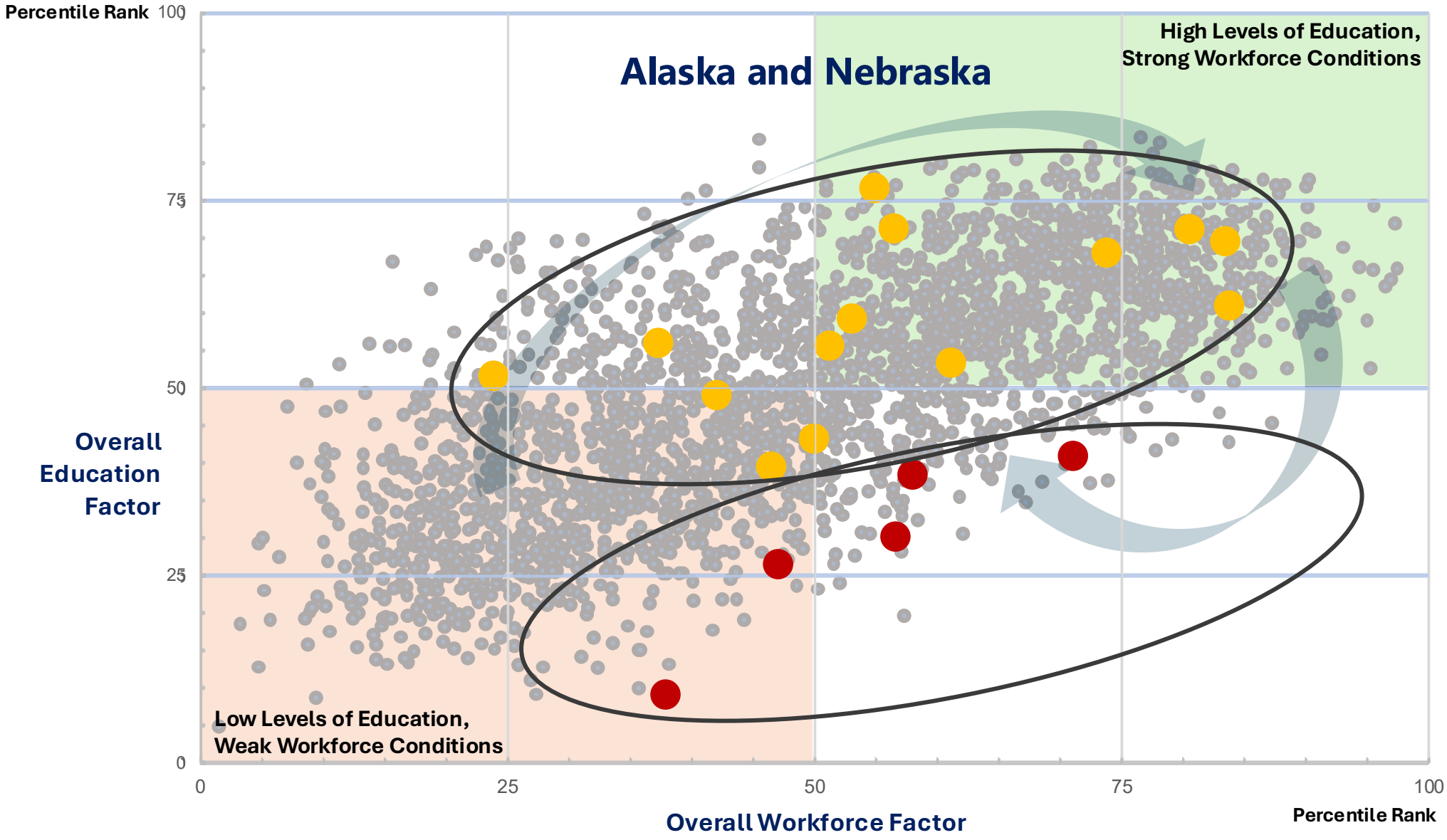
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

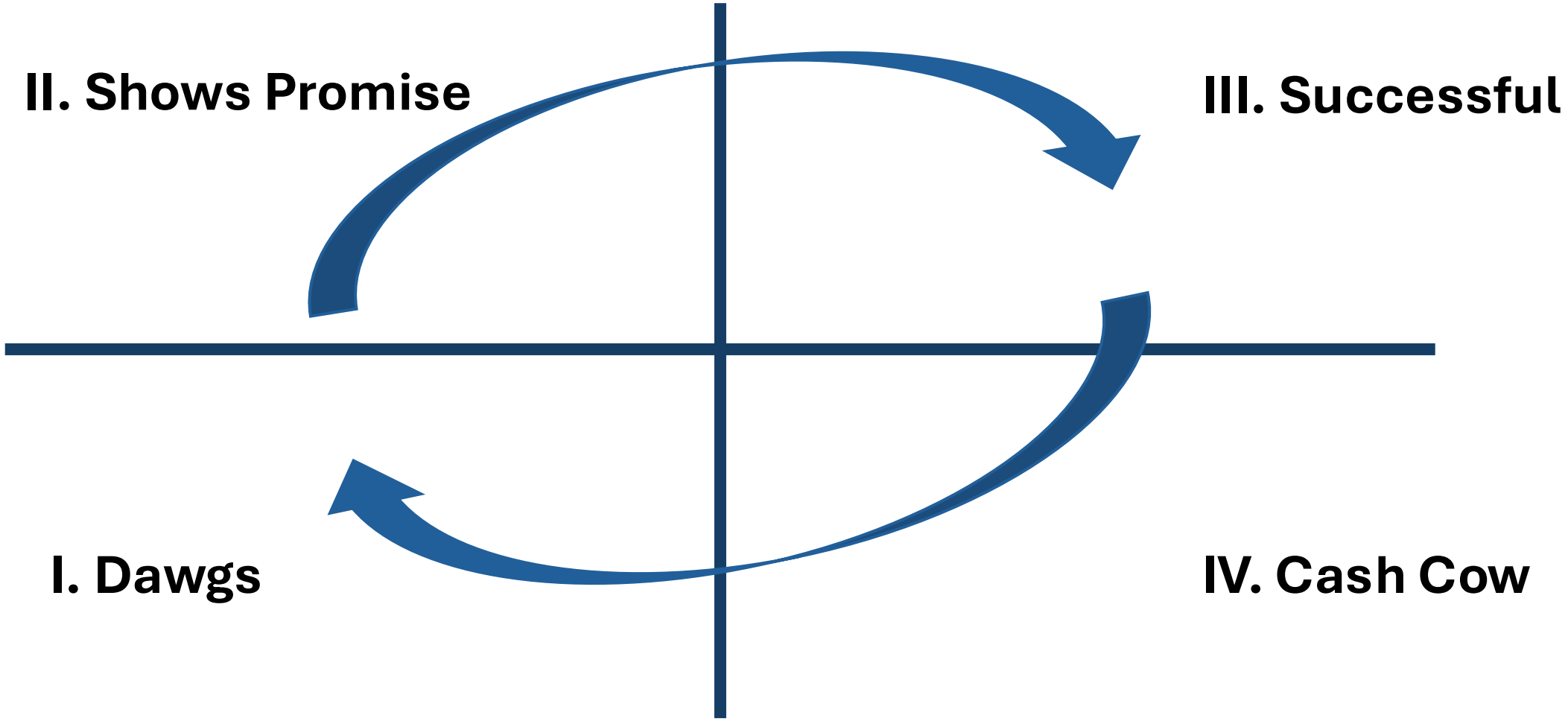
EWNI Overall Education and Workforce Conditions – 2024



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Life Cycle of an Economy

Modified Boston Consulting Group Matrix



Life Cycle of an Economy

Modified Boston Consulting Group Matrix

II. Shows Promise

- Has some ingredients of a great economy but not yet there
- Shows great potential for success
- Yet to be financially self-sustaining
- Needs nuanced revisions to become fully successful

III. Successful

- Financially self-sustaining
- Has potential for even greater success
- Recognized for quality and value
- Popular with the public
- Needs modest adjustments to optimize growth

I. Dawgs

- Startups that expend extensive resources with little return on investment
- Poor performers, often older initiatives that have lost effectiveness
- Niche companies that are not self-sustaining
- Needs systemic revision to be self-sustaining
- Drag on public services

IV. Cash Cow

- Older projects
- No investment is required to sustain positive revenue stream
- Sustained by legacy reputation
- Will need modernization

Pathway to ~~Prosperity~~ *Progress*



PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

Aligning Skills and Credentials for Community Growth

Pathways to Progress

- ***Pathways to Progress*** is an economic and workforce development initiative led by the ACHE to help strategically align educational attainment with workforce demands in regions poised for growth.
- Using data tools like the Education Workforce Needs Index (EWNI) and the Economic Life Cycle Matrix, this initiative supports communities where increasing postsecondary credentials will directly improve economic vitality.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

Aligning Skills and Credentials for Community Growth

What are the Regional Differences in Education and Workforce Challenges?

Education and Workforce Needs Index

Factors and Measures

Education

- Ages 18 to 64 with a High School Diploma Only
- Ages 25 to 64 with an Associates Degree
- Ages 25 to 64 with a Bachelor's Degree
- Difference in College Attainment between Young and Older Adults
- Ages 18 to 29 with No College Credential, Not Enrolled

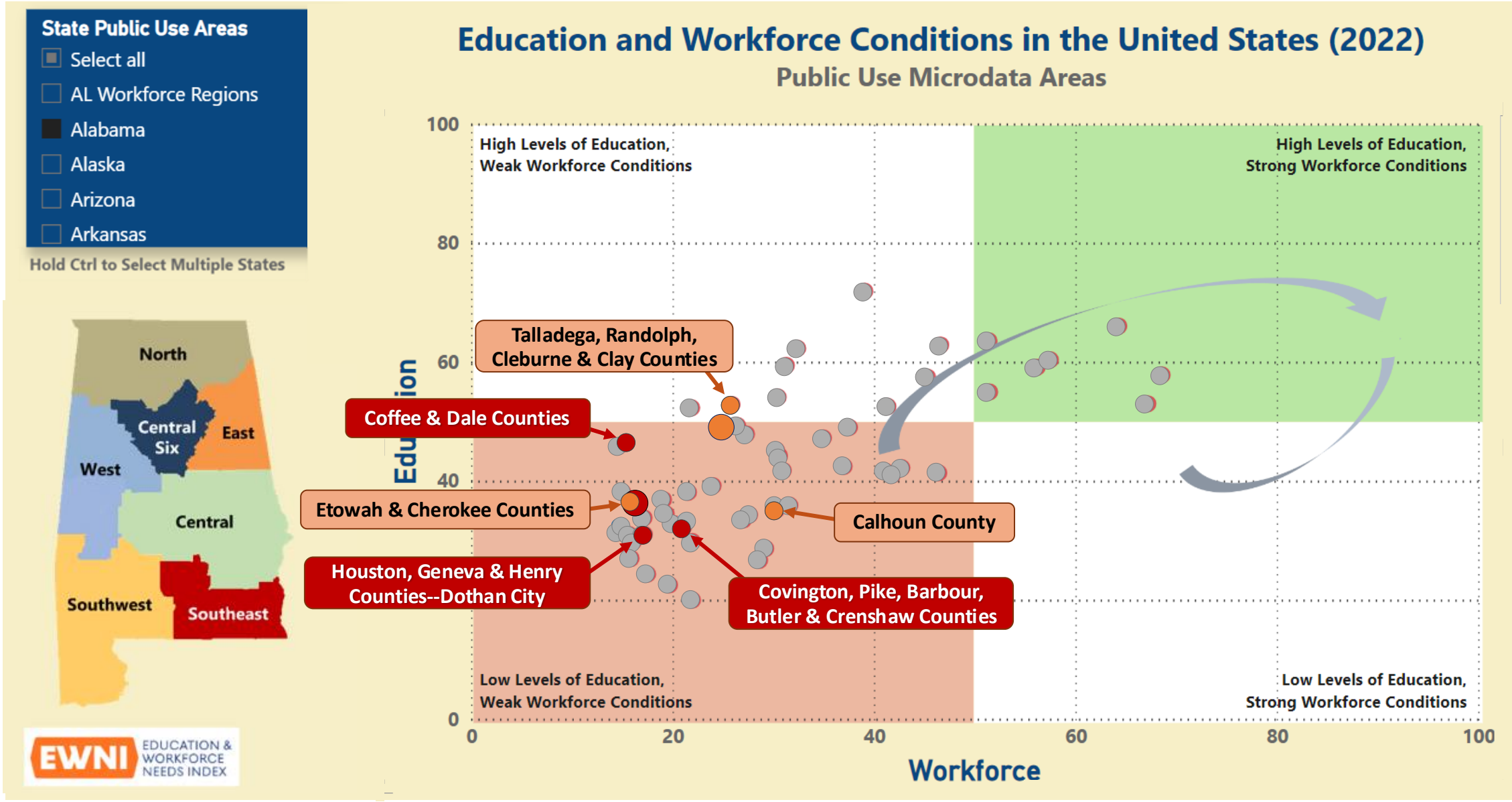
Workforce

- Working-Age Participation in the Labor Force
- Unemployment
- Employment in Manufacturing and Extraction
- Median Personal Income (total personal income)
- Median Annual Wage Income (full-time workers)
- Adults with SSI or Welfare Income

Other Considerations

- Age (Young vs. Older)
- Population Growth
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Poverty

Alabama – East and Southeast Workforce Regions



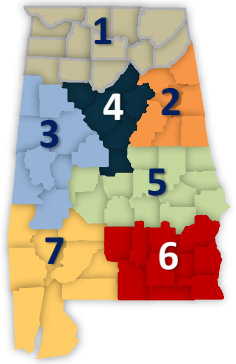
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Education and Workforce Needs Index
Alabama

Alabama | Southeast | U.S. Quartiles

Need or Challenge

Workforce Regions



U.S. Median

Overall Education and Workforce Need

Education Need

- High School Completion Only
- Associate Degree Completion
- Completion of a Bachelor's Degree or Higher
- College Attainment of Young vs Older Adults
- Enrollment of Young Adults without a College Degree

Workforce Need

- Labor Force Participation
- Unemployment
- Employment in Volatile Industries
- Median Annual Wage Earnings for Full-Time Workers
- Median Family Income
- Working-Age Adults with SSI or Welfare Income

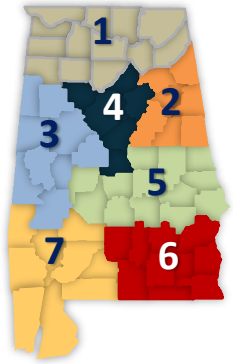
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Education and Workforce Needs Index
Alabama

Alabama | East | U.S. Quartiles

Need or Challenge

Workforce Regions



U.S. Median

Overall Education and Workforce Need

Education Need

- High School Completion Only
- Associate Degree Completion
- Completion of a Bachelor's Degree or Higher
- College Attainment of Young vs Older Adults
- Enrollment of Young Adults without a College Degree

Workforce Need

- Labor Force Participation
- Unemployment
- Employment in Volatile Industries
- Median Annual Wage Earnings for Full-Time Workers
- Median Family Income
- Working-Age Adults with SSI or Welfare Income

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

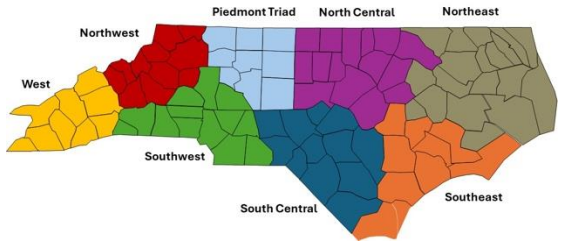
Examples of Other States

Education and Workforce Needs Index – North Carolina

2024

Regions

- North Carolina
- West
- Northwest
- Piedmont Triad
- North Central
- Northeast
- Southeast
- South Central
- Southwest



Lowest NEED | NEED | Highest NEED

Overall Education and Workforce Need

Education Need

- High School Completion Only
- Associate Degree Completion
- Completion of a Bachelor's Degree or Higher
- College Attainment of Young vs Older Adults
- Enrollment of Young Adults without a College Degree

Workforce Need

- Labor Force Participation
- Unemployment
- Employment in Volatile Industries
- Median Annual Wage Earnings for Full-Time Workers
- Median Family Income
- Working-Age Adults with SSI or Welfare Income

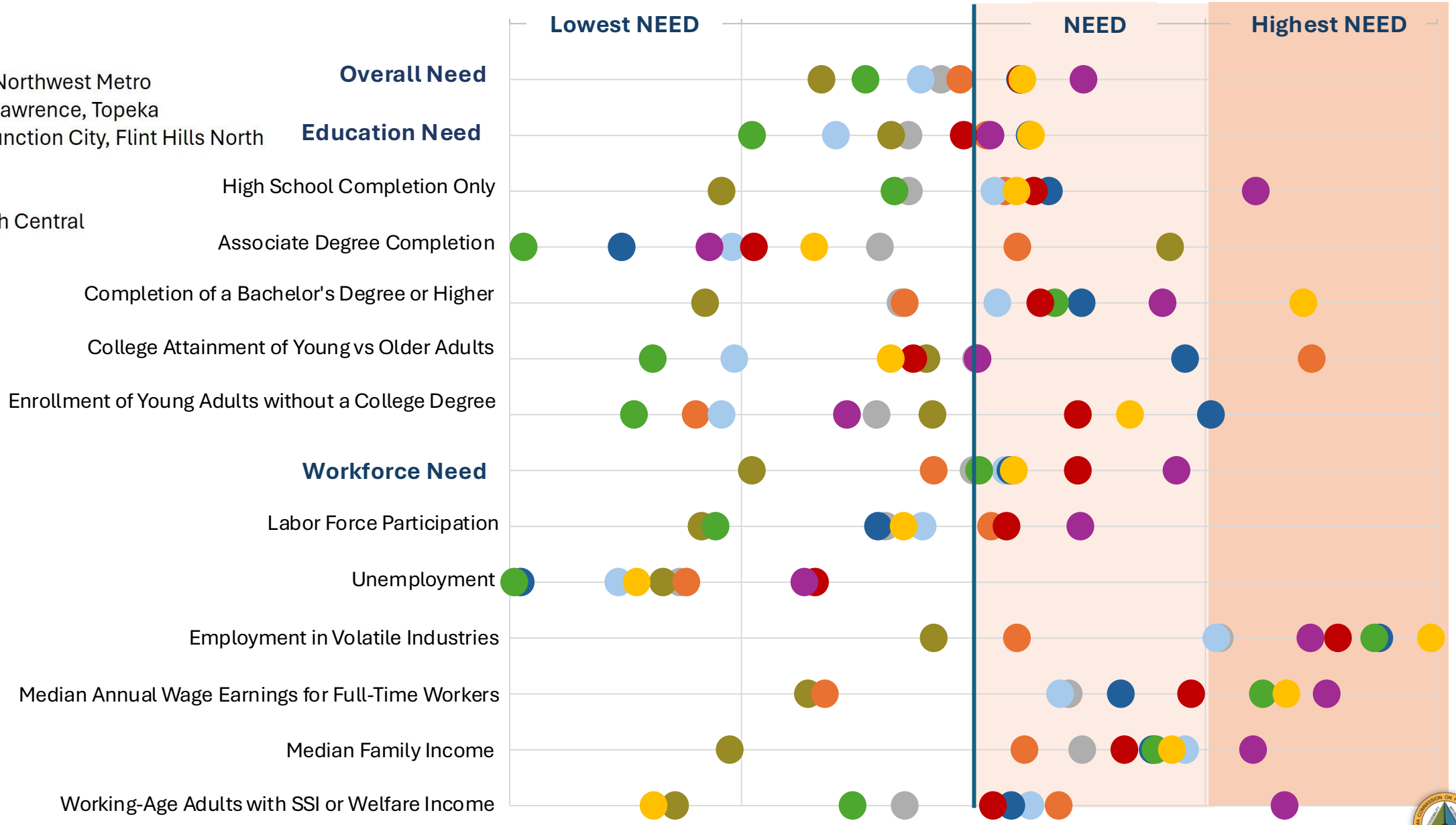
U.S. Median

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Education and Workforce Needs Index – Kansas

2024

- Kansas
- Kansas City – Northwest Metro
- East Central, Lawrence, Topeka
- Manhattan – Junction City, Flint Hills North
- North Central
- Northwest
- Wichita – South Central
- Southwest
- Southeast



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

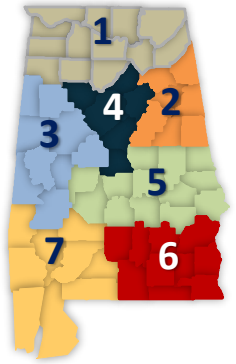
Drilling Down

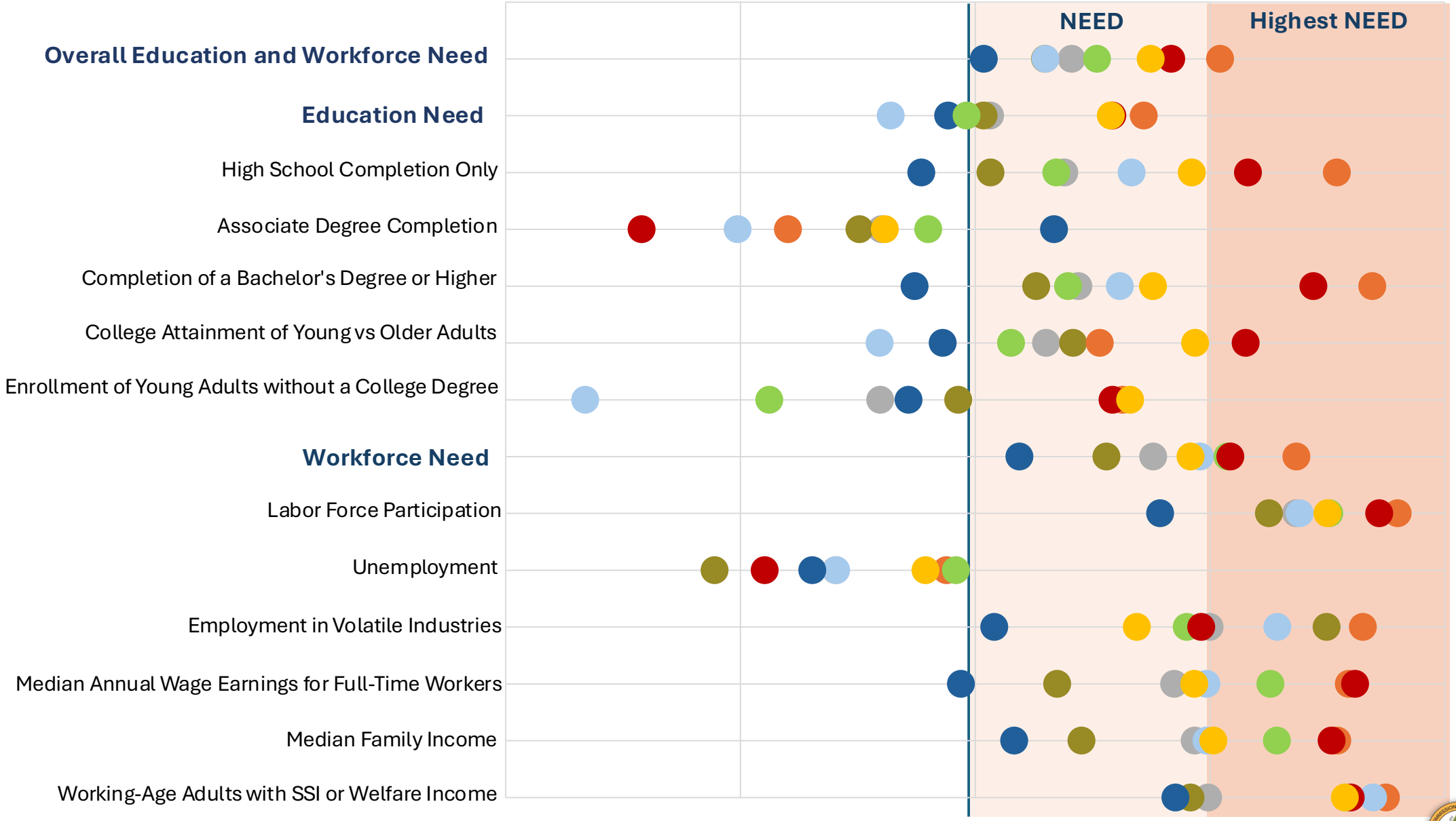
Determine Regional Challenges
Develop Regional Solutions

Education and Workforce Needs Index – Alabama

2024

Workforce Regions

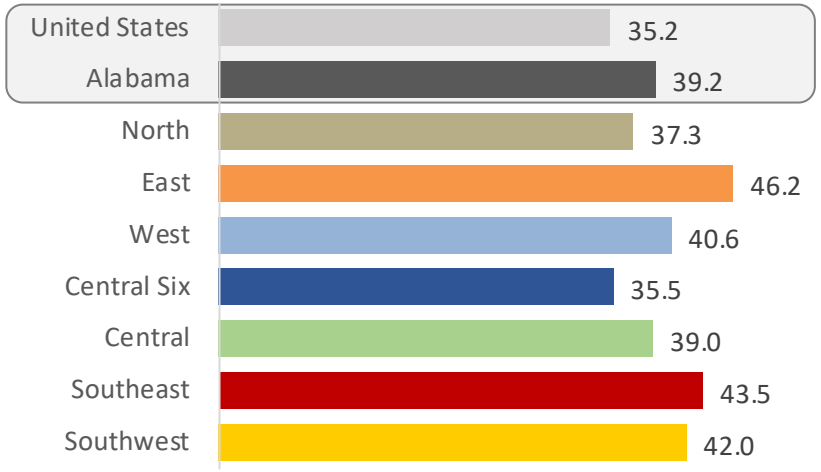




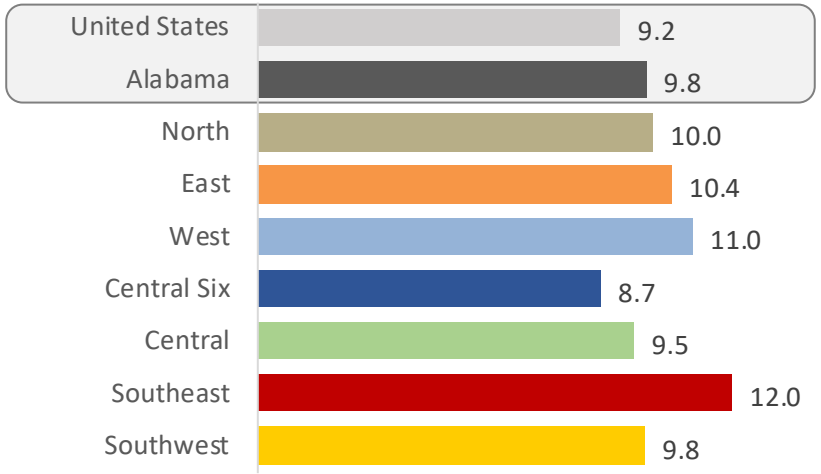
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EDUCATION

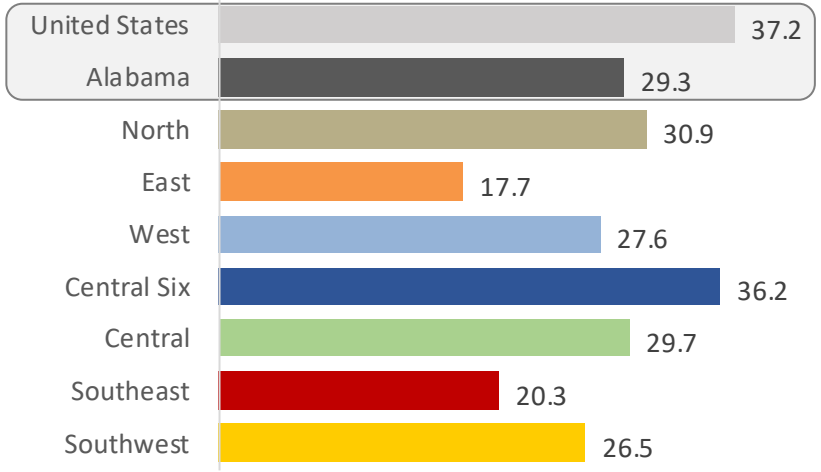
Percentage of Adults 18 to 64 Years Old with Only a High School Diploma Only (2024)



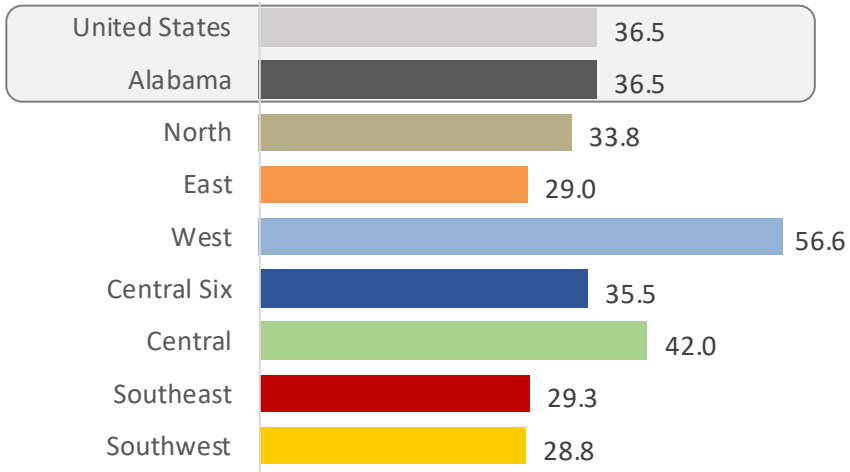
Percentage of Adults Ages 25 to 64 with an Associate Degree (2024)



Percentage of Adults Ages 25 to 64 with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2024)



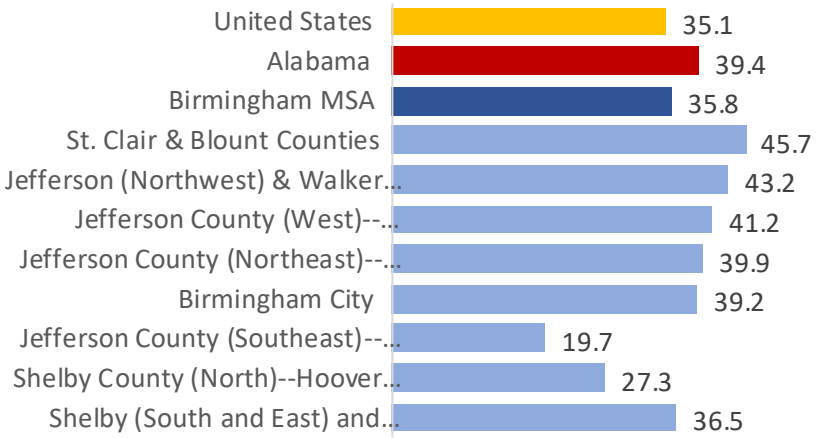
Percentage of Adults Ages 18 to 29 without College Degrees, Enrolled (2024)



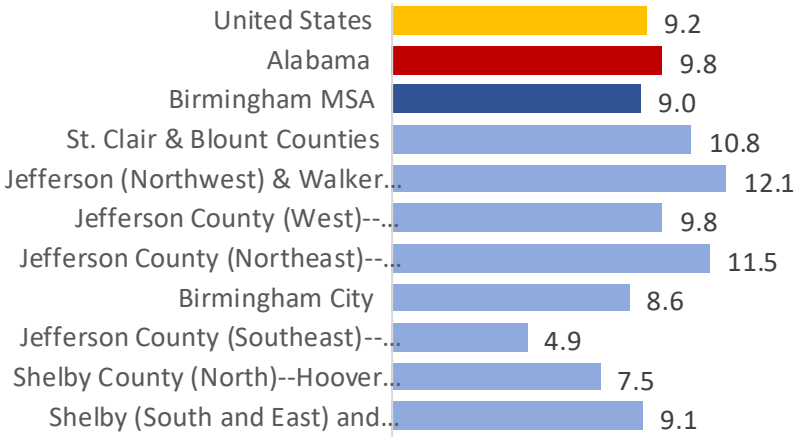
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

EDUCATION

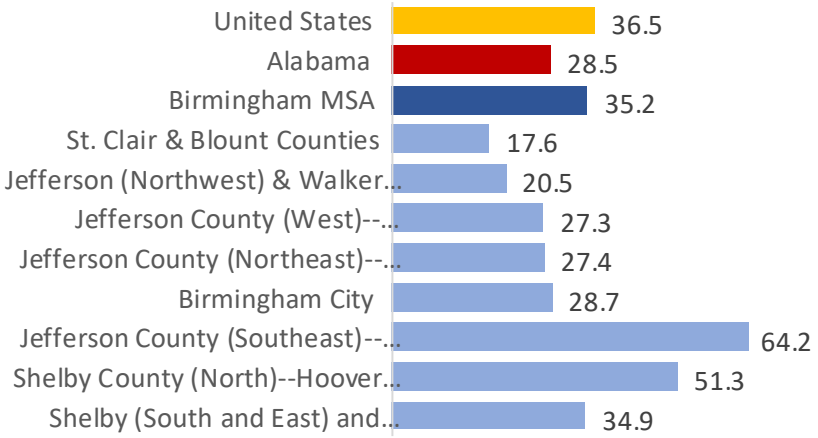
Percentage of Adults 18 to 64 Years Old with Only a High School Diploma Only (2024)



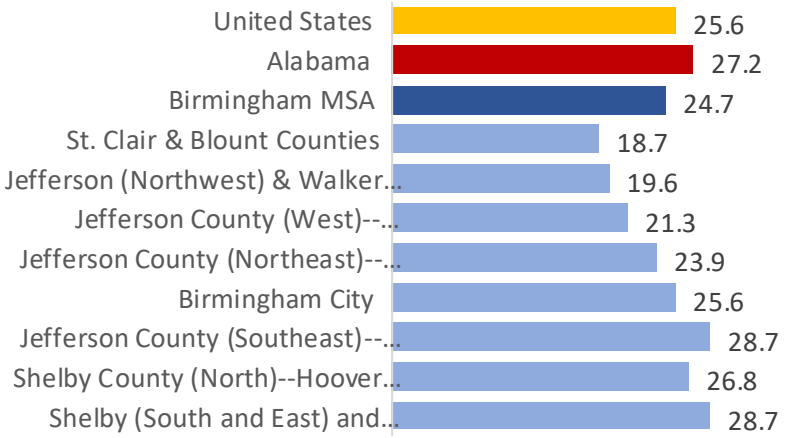
Percentage of Adults Ages 25 to 64 with an Associate Degree (2024)



Percentage of Adults Ages 25 to 64 with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2024)



Percentage of Adults Ages 18 to 29 without College Degrees, Enrolled (2024)



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2024 American Community Survey; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Questions for Community Leaders

- What are your community's greatest education and workforce strengths and challenges?
- What does the available data not tell us about your community's unique context or circumstances?
- What is your vision for the future of your community?
- What priorities or actions are needed to achieve that vision?
- Who are the key partners and stakeholders responsible for making it happen?
- What is the expected timeline for achieving meaningful progress?
- How will progress and success be measured?
- What story do you hope your community's efforts and outcomes will tell as this work moves forward?

Conversation Starters

- **Life Cycle of an Economy Matrix**
  - Patterns don't lie, but they only tell a little of the why.
  - Engage local leaders in understanding context.
  - Monitor several measures, but not too many. (Use the right ones.)
- **Education Workforce Needs Index (EWNI)**
  - Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs)
  - Identify a community's challenges and possible solutions.
  - Focused interventions
- **State SHEEO Support**
  - Facilitate conversation
  - Assist with legislative ask

ALL IN AL

Retain Alabama
Recall Alabama
ReEngage Alabama

Pathway to ~~Prosperity~~

Progress

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

Aligning Skills and Credentials for Community Growth

Alabama Commission on Higher Education

State and Regional Workforce Profiles

2026



Education, Labor Force, and Economic Trends from 2014 to 2024

Alabama gains more college graduates but falls further behind in wages, ACHE finds

JULY 13, 2026 • EDUCATION, NEWS



BY TRISHA POWELL CRAIN

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. – Alabama has more college-educated adults than it did 10 years ago, but the gains – and the wages tied to them – vary sharply across the state, **according to a new report from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education**.

The State and Regional Workforce Profiles report compares two points in time, 2014 and 2024, for Alabama, other states and the nation as a whole.

It also examines how education, wages and labor force participation differ across Alabama's seven workforce regions.

Higher Education's Role in Optimizing Regional Prosperity and Economic Renewal



Dr. Jim Purcell
Executive Director

jim.purcell@ache.edu
(334)328-7177

Dr. Patrick Kelly
Workforce Alignment

patrick.kelly@ache.edu
(334)212-2235