American Student Assistance®

Bellwether

MAKING IT WORK

Ten stories of promise and progress in high school work-based learning

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Work-based learning opportunities are an essential component of many students' learning journeys. Whether it comes in the form of an internship, a pre-apprenticeship, or a cooperative education program, the ability to acquire new skills and work experience while in high school can significantly expand a young person's understanding of the myriad pathways they can explore to improve their employability after graduation.

In 2021, the teams at Bellwether and American Student Assistance® (ASA) analyzed work-based learning policies in all 50 states and D.C. against a rubric consisting of 15 criteria organized into six categories (Table 1). This work aimed to provide as full a picture of each state's work-based learning policies as possible.

The analysis captured a moment in time and established a baseline of where state policies were and where they could continue to improve. Where possible, it also noted work that was planned or in process even if it had not yet borne fruit. These planned or in-progress developments demonstrated states' commitment to improving the work-based learning experiences available to students.

This report revisits planned or in-progress work in 10 states to understand how it has progressed. The 10 states profiled are taking very different approaches to strengthening their work-based learning programs and policies (Table 2). These examples offer a glimpse into the many ways that states can approach this work, shining a light on exciting progress being made and offering instructive examples that can inspire similar improvements across the country.[1]

Table 1. Work-based learning policy rubric (adapted from 2021 report)

Category	Criteria	Description
Existence of work-based learning policy	Work-based learning definition	Does the state have a formal definition of work-based learning that includes opportunities for high school students?
Content of work-based learning policies	Work-based learning as part of high school graduation requirements	Does state policy allow or require internships or other work-based learning opportunities to count for credit toward graduation?
	Work-based learning eligibility	Are all high school students eligible for work-based learning opportunities, or is eligibility restricted to students enrolled in specific programs?
	Access for all	Are there state policies designed to support access for underserved groups of students (e.g., preference for students from low-income households or students enrolled in low-performing schools, explicit supports for students with disabilities, transportation stipends)?
	Addressing policy barriers	Does state policy address key barriers to work-based learning?
Work-based learning funding	Financial incentives	Are there financial incentives (e.g., tax credits) for employers that offer work-based learning opportunities to high school students?
	Dedicated federal funding	Does the state use its Perkins V funding to support work-based learning?
	Dedicated state funding	Is there a dedicated source of state funding for work-based learning?
Work-based learning support infrastructure	Statewide support infrastructure, intermediary, and/or public-private partnerships	Is there a system or organization designed to facilitate work-based learning opportunities and/or are there public-private partnerships that support access to paid or for-credit work-based learning opportunities for high school students?
	Work-based learning communications infrastructure	Are there systems in place to communicate among schools, students, employers, and other stakeholders about work-based learning opportunities?
Work-based learning quality infrastructure	Experience quality	Is there a statewide framework in place that defines quality expectations for work-based learning experiences and holds employers accountable to those expectations?
	Program quality	Is there a statewide framework in place that defines quality expectations for work-based learning programs and holds schools/districts accountable to those expectations?
Work-based learning accountability	Data collection	Is there a process in place to track student participation in work-based learning opportunities and their outcomes?
	Use of data to drive access for all	Does the state disaggregate work-based learning data by student demographics and experience type?
	Use of data to drive quality	Does the state use disaggregated data as a component of its quality framework?

Table 2. Summary of states' work-based learning initiatives (since 2021)

State	Work-based learning initiatives	Criteria
Connecticut	Advanced regional sector partnerships and public-private partnerships to support education-to-career pathways.	• Statewide support infrastructure
Illinois	Launched the Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network (I-WIN) to surface and share innovative approaches to work-based learning.	• Statewide support infrastructure
Kansas	Piloted, and then made permanent, a regional support structure for work-based learning.	• Dedicated state funding • Statewide support infrastructure
Louisiana	Launched a new dual enrollment program and revised the school performance accountability system to include work-based learning.	• Data collection • Work-based learning as part of graduation requirements • Work-based learning eligibility
Maine	Leveraged federal COVID-19 relief dollars to expand extended learning opportunities in communities across the state.	• Dedicated state funding
Maryland	Launched three grant-funded programs designed to improve access to work-based learning for students with disabilities and expand youth apprenticeships.	• Access for all • Data collection • Use of data to drive access for all
New Mexico	Launched three new work-based learning programs with the support of additional state funding and stronger statewide infrastructure.	• Dedicated state funding • Statewide support infrastructure
North Carolina	Scaled pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities with the support of state funding and centralized resources.	• Access for all • Work-based learning communications infrastructure
Washington	Grew the Career Connect Washington system through sector-specific strategies, grant funding, and a new leadership structure.	• Statewide support infrastructure • Dedicated state and federal funding • Financial incentives
West Virginia	Built robust data systems to track work-based learning participation and tie funding to outcomes.	• Data collection • Use of data to drive quality

KEY THEMES

Each state's efforts are unique to its educational, political, and economic conditions, and detailed accounts of these efforts are provided in state profiles. Several key themes emerged across these 10 states' work-based learning initiatives, illustrating common challenges and opportunities:

1 **A clear definition of work-based learning is necessary for a coherent state approach, but this remains a complex endeavor.** Four states — Louisiana, West Virginia, Connecticut, and Illinois — mentioned efforts to clarify or expand definitions of work-based learning, sometimes spurred by broader updates to college and career readiness standards or accountability requirements. These updates could take the form of legislation, as in Louisiana, where state legislators updated and clarified the statewide definition of work-based learning. Updates could also include administrative protocols, as in West Virginia, where state data systems have imposed a common language around the different types of work-based learning offerings available to students. However, given decentralization of governance and the variety of stakeholders involved, building a common language remains a challenge in some states, such as Connecticut and Illinois. In Connecticut, state leaders are working to overcome a language barrier between academic and business partners, and in Illinois state leaders discussed the possibility of building a "dictionary" of key work-based learning terms for stakeholders.

2 **Policy changes have helped expand work-based learning opportunity contexts and address known barriers.** Maryland, Connecticut, Louisiana, and Kansas have established new statewide visions, strategic plans, or college and career readiness standards that have incentivized progress. And in other states, new legislation, regulations, and grant programs have helped remove barriers to access. West Virginia's Students' Right-to-Know Act of 2020 requires high schools to provide students with information needed to make career and postsecondary decisions, while Maryland has made efforts to expand work-based learning supports for students with disabilities and protect young workers from age discrimination in apprenticeship hiring. At the same time, work-based learning policies can continue to conflict with existing education and social policies, leading to lower uptake and barriers to access. Of the 10 states profiled in this report, only New Mexico provides core credits that count toward graduation for complete work-based learning experiences. In Maine, laws addressing eligibility for housing benefits may have discouraged at least a few students from low-income households from participating in paid work-based learning experiences.

3 **Cross-agency and cross-sector networks have helped expand work-based learning opportunities, foster system coherence, and support professional learning.** In Connecticut, Kansas, Maryland, North Carolina, and Washington, work-based learning or career councils organized within or through the Office of the Governor or the state legislature have generated state-level policy priorities and programmatic initiatives. These councils bring together state agency leaders from education, commerce, labor,

and economic development departments, as well as representatives from institutions of higher education, labor, and the business community, to identify opportunities and overcome implementation challenges. In Illinois, I-WIN has fostered statewide learning and professional development around work-based learning best practices. Illinois' I-WIN initiative is an example of a centralized professional development network where employers, educators, and work-based learning coordinators can participate virtually in a community of practice and have opportunities to interact, learn, and share best practices and resources.

4 **Funding is key to states' work-based learning efforts, but time-limited funds pose challenges for program sustainability.** Work-based learning initiatives in at least four states — Kansas, Maryland, New Mexico, and Washington — have benefited from consistent, budgeted annual funding. Moreover, some states have leveraged various financial tools, including a set annual amount across multiple years, line-item funding established in departmental budgets, and mandated state funding increases, to provide college and career preparedness through work-based learning opportunities. Other states have operated work-based learning initiatives with a variety of funding sources pulled together from various agencies (e.g., commerce, labor, education) and grants (Sidebar 1). Federal dollars have also helped states launch pilot programs, spur innovations, and scale existing programs. Maine used some of its pandemic relief funding to expand its extended learning opportunities. Kansas used Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) funds to launch a pilot work-based learning program that now receives sustained state funding due to its success; Washington used Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds to provide grants to organizations to create career-

Sidebar 1: Federal funding streams for work-based learning

The 10 states profiled in this report pointed to four primary sources of federal funding to support their work-based learning efforts:

1. **Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)**: This federal law, last reauthorized in 2018, provides nearly $1.4 billion to states annually to develop and implement high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs.[2]

2. **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**: This federal law, last reauthorized in 2014, supports states' work to establish employment, education, and training programs to help job seekers succeed in the labor market.[3]

3. **Apprenticeship Building America**: This grant program aimed to strengthen and modernize the Registered Apprenticeship Program system. The U.S. Department of Labor launched it in 2022 with $113 million in available funds. Organizations including nonprofits, labor organizations, public and state institutions of higher education, and county governments could apply; recipients received awards between $1 million and $8 million.[4]

4. **Good Jobs Challenge**: This program aims to strengthen regional, sector-based workforce training systems. The U.S. Economic Development Administration initially launched this program in 2022 with $500 million from the American Rescue Plan. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of fiscal year (FY) 2024 provided an additional $25 million to the program.[5]

connected programs; Maryland has used a federal Rehabilitation Services Administration grant to pilot initiatives supporting students with disabilities; and North Carolina, Connecticut, and Washington used federal grants such as the Good Jobs Challenge and Apprenticeship Building America. However, as state revenues contract, line items in department budgets will be vulnerable to cuts, and the expiration of federal pandemic relief funding means initiatives face significant sustainability challenges.

5 **States need additional staff and tools to support students and businesses to navigate work-based learning programs and forge connections.** North Carolina recently hired a new staff member whose role is to be the "conductor" and single point of contact for work-based learning inquiries and opportunities in the state. In Maine, districts used federal pandemic relief dollars to hire school-based coordinators who work directly with students and local businesses to foster work-based learning connections. And in Kansas, schools are required to work with each student to create an individual learning plan to support them with goal-setting, including skills assessment, worksite information, and the necessary work-based learning paperwork. However, an inability to fund expanded staffing (or a wariness of hiring permanent new positions using temporary pandemic relief dollars) has limited the reach of several work-based learning initiatives. Some states are relying on other tools and community partners instead. West Virginia and North Carolina use online portals with navigational tools that guide students and families in these decisions and offer career options and information. North Carolina's tool also connects classroom educators and employers to expand work-based learning opportunities for students. Navigational efforts are most effective with both human and technological support, but states often lack human or financial capital to provide both types of services.

6 **States have made efforts to expand business partnerships to support work-based learning but continue to experience pain points.** Every state included in this report expressed a desire to build more and stronger business partnerships, and the number of partnerships formed is a frequently cited indicator of progress for work-based learning. Career Connect Washington identified "sector leaders" in 10 high-demand workforce areas and provided grant funds for these organizations to lead the expansion of career-connected learning programs. In recent years, Connecticut and Kansas have developed regional partnerships that align with local economic needs and opportunities. In Maine, the expansion of extended learning opportunities has allowed communities to hire school-based coordinators who can seek out business partners relevant to local school districts and connect them with students. However, given the locally rooted nature of most partnerships, it can be challenging for states to track opportunities systematically and support relationship-building. Moreover, not all partnerships remain open to all students. In Maryland, the state has been working to improve its employer outreach to ensure business partners are prepared to support students with disabilities and understand all the wraparound supports that those students receive.

7 **States know they need robust, high-quality data and strong data infrastructure, but it remains a significant challenge.** West Virginia both built out the capabilities of its existing administrative data collection system and built a new system that collects work-based learning data including participant hours, wages, and certificates earned. Louisiana is currently in the process of expanding its student transcript system to collect new data related to work-based learning, while Connecticut is in the early stages of developing a framework for a statewide, integrated data system. Both West Virginia and Louisiana either use (or plan to use) this data in statewide accountability systems. West Virginia has also been using this data to improve program quality and tell a story of impact that energizes stakeholders and supports program growth. Elsewhere, however, data collection remains a challenge, often due to limited funding and the lack of comprehensive statewide infrastructure.

8 **Formal evaluations can be a useful tool in assessing work-based learning offerings and identifying gaps in access.** In Maryland, a formal evaluation of federally funded work-based learning support services for students with disabilities helped state leaders identify strategic changes to better support these students and pursue additional federal grants. Similarly, evaluation evidence from an initiative in Maine indicated that the state's work-based learning offerings were having a significant impact on student outcomes while also highlighting gaps in access across and within communities. Evaluations are an important way for leaders to identify challenges and adjust programs and can be most feasible when supported with state or federal funding and local research partners.

9 **Transportation remains a significant challenge, especially in rural areas.** The 10 states included in this report have large swaths of suburban and rural geography. Unlike urban areas, where public transportation and/or ridesharing options can enable students to participate in work-based learning, rural and suburban settings require transportation solutions that are often beyond the control of state education policymakers. At least one state — Maryland — considered a program to help students acquire their driver's licenses, only to realize there are not enough cars available for students to drive. Maine aspired to provide school bus transportation but struggled with a lack of bus drivers. For work-based learning opportunities to be accessible to all students, new solutions for transportation will be required.

CONCLUSION

By equipping young people with the technical, academic, and interpersonal skills and experiences they need to be successful in the workplace, work-based learning has the potential to provide more students with pathways to economic opportunity. States play an important role in creating policies that support high-quality work-based learning at the local level. The work that the 10 states in this report are currently undertaking offers a glimpse into the challenges and opportunities that state leaders face. It can be instructive for leaders in other states as they prioritize creating, expanding, and improving work-based learning opportunities for young people.

STATE PROFILES

CONNECTICUT

Using partnerships to drive steady progress

Criteria of Focus

- Statewide support infrastructure

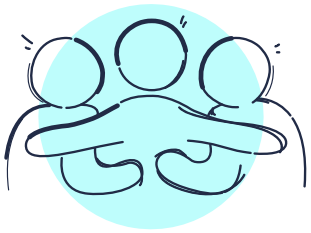
Key Takeaways

- Regional, sector-based partnerships facilitate sector-based education and training opportunities.
- Strong partnerships, bolstered by an in-progress integrated data system, underpin future progress.

Introduction

In Connecticut, the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS) is the executive branch agency that serves as the staff for the Governor's Workforce Council (GWC) and is tasked with "setting strategy and policy for the state's Pre-K through retirement workforce pipeline." In this role, OWS serves as the primary "coordinator for businesses, educators, trainers, state agencies, state workforce boards, non-profits, and others."[6] In 2020, the GWC's strategic plan identified two work-based learning goals: create a work-based learning intermediary and launch a work-based learning portal and marketing initiative.[7] The strategic plan also called for the creation of Regional Sector Partnerships (RSPs), which are coalitions of employers with common workforce needs that coordinate with local school districts, higher education institutions, and training providers to create aligned career pathways and training programs.[8]

While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the state's efforts to create a work-based learning intermediary and learning portal, RSPs have taken off. This regional, cross-sector approach to work-based learning and career pathways is helping hundreds of middle school, high school, and postsecondary students across Connecticut learn about local businesses and build skills aligned to business' needs.



Regional, sector-based partnerships facilitate sector-based education and training opportunities

The first RSPs launched in 2021. Today, there are 14 RSPs across Connecticut comprising more than 500 local businesses.[9] These RSPs focus on critical hiring needs for the state, including manufacturing, health care, technology, and bioscience.[10] They work directly with K-12 school systems and other educational institutions to "teach every student about careers and to help them explore their options, including work-based learning opportunities."[11] The New Haven Regional Bioscience Collaboration, for example, pulled together all the participating companies in that sector to host middle school, high school, and postsecondary student interns. In summer 2023, the program engaged more than 200 students.[12] The Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Partnership, in collaboration with the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, launched the Youth Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative to serve K-12 students. It offers a range of manufacturing exposure and training to elementary, middle, and high school students, including a 150-hour skills training curriculum taught at 12 high schools throughout the region that prepares high school students to enter the manufacturing workforce directly upon graduation.[13]

These opportunities, coupled with enhanced career pathways advising in middle and high schools,[14] are helping ensure that Connecticut's students have access to systems that support academic and career progress from kindergarten through postsecondary.

Public-private partnerships provide seamless pathways from postsecondary to career

In addition to its work on RSPs, OWS has focused on building seamless postsecondary-to-career pathways via public-private partnerships among the state's five workforce development boards, chambers of commerce, institutions of higher education, and community-based partners. One such effort resulted in the Tech Talent Accelerator (TTA), which launched in 2022. It uses employer-higher education partnerships in an effort to increase access to credential pathways that lead to in-demand tech jobs.[15]

The initiative has received a total of $2 million over two rounds of funding. At a September 2024 event highlighting the initiative, it was reported that the TTA has created 15 academic pathways, engaged 13 higher education institutions and 34 industry partners, and logged 305 course enrollments, among other accomplishments.[16]

Kelli-Marie Vallieres, OWS' chief workforce officer and vice chair of the GWC, shared that the current cohort of 230 students have enrolled in TTA opportunities that strengthen student competencies to meet industry needs. OWS plans to expand this type of program into other sectors such as health care and bioscience.[17]

Strong partnerships, bolstered by an in-progress integrated data system, underpin future progress

The success of OWS' efforts to build RSPs and develop dynamic public-private partnerships led to Connecticut receiving the largest Good Jobs Challenge grant in the country — a $23.9 million award "to invest in industry-driven regional sector partnerships and train and place 2,000 individuals in high-quality jobs."[18] Vallieres pointed out this award affirms the state's commitment to "robustly engage our business partners."[19]

"I think work-based learning is that way of … enhancing people's networks and increasing their opportunity."

Kelli-Marie Vallieres
Chief Workforce Officer and Vice Chair, Governor's Workforce Council, Connecticut

In addition, state leaders are currently working to develop a framework for an integrated data system. While the work-based learning portal identified in the 2020 strategic plan never got off the ground due to funding challenges, Vallieres shared that Connecticut is currently working to design a framework for a P-20 WIN integrated data system through consultation from nonprofit Jobs for the Future and support from social change organization The Connecticut Project. The envisioned system will allow for better data collection, analysis, and reporting to "strengthen and scale proven programs and strategies … and [expand access] across all workforce development efforts."[20]

In December 2024, the GWC finalized its strategic plan.[21] Building off the lessons learned through implementing the 2020 strategic plan, and the pandemic interruptions of next steps, this plan looks at "how we build systems and how those systems then support these really important, key initiatives."[22] Vallieres sees work-based learning in K-12 and postsecondary as an elevated priority in Connecticut. She said, "I think work-based learning is that way of … enhancing people's networks and increasing their opportunity."[23] The successes to date of RSPs and TTA, bolstered by a strong strategic plan, will help state leaders to continue moving toward this vision.

ILLINOIS

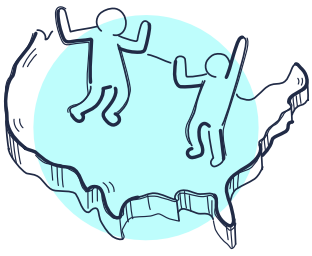
Developing a statewide network of work-based learning resources

Criteria of Focus

- Statewide support infrastructure

Key Takeaways

- I-WIN serves three primary functions: to surface challenges, share successful practices, and provide inspiration and proof points about what works.
- This work is not “one and done” — communities need ongoing, differentiated support.
- Sustained engagement with I-WIN resources is a primary indicator of success, while a lack of funding limits capacity.
- As the state continues to focus on college and career preparation, I-WIN will continue to be a support for schools and communities.



Introduction

Preparing young people for careers post-high school has been a primary focus of Illinois legislators and educators for nearly a decade. The legislature passed the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act (PWR) in 2016, establishing a set of strategies that districts must implement to ensure their students are prepared for life after high school.[24] One of those strategies, the College and Career Pathway Endorsement (CCPE), provides an opportunity for students to receive an endorsement that reflects their completion of work-based learning and other indicators of “readiness for postsecondary programs and entry-level professional learning experiences.”[25]

For the first several years following the passage of PWR, schools and communities across Illinois focused on creating in-person work-based learning opportunities. However, as schools closed to in-person learning in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and their community partners began grappling with how to provide work-based learning to students in a remote context.

Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University (EdSystems) is an organization that provides resources to districts to implement CCPE and, after hearing district leaders’ challenges firsthand, responded by launching the Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network (I-WIN). The initial goal of I-WIN was to surface and share innovative approaches to work-based learning, especially remote approaches, given the continuation of remote and hybrid schooling in many communities in fall 2020. Heather Penczak, director of innovation at EdSystems, explained in a 2020 interview: “This work is especially important now as educators work to provide students with meaningful, consistent opportunities, whether they are in the classroom, implementing remote learning, or proceeding with a hybrid model this fall.”[26]

More than four years later, I-WIN continues to be an important component of the state’s support for work-based learning, especially given the decentralized nature of its approach, with districts owning much of the development and implementation of programming.[27]

I-WIN serves three primary functions: to surface challenges, share successful practices, and provide inspiration and proof points about what works

I-WIN is a free, virtual community of more than 2,300 education and community leaders across Illinois, including staff from school districts, postsecondary institutions, intermediary educational agencies,[28] state agencies, employers, and community-based organizations. Participants receive professional learning, engage in communities of practice, share ideas and resources, and build relationships with other leaders. A small team of two people from EdSystems runs the network, managing all communication with participants, surfacing learning needs and coordinating content for sessions, organizing resources to showcase, and identifying high-potential models to highlight and share best practices.

Penczak explained that, during the first year of I-WIN, participants were largely focused on how to do work-based learning remotely, given the ongoing pandemic. However, she said, "we saw pretty quickly that people appreciated the focused space to talk about work-based learning. People get really excited to share the work they're doing. They share everything. They share agendas, planning documents, and the materials they use with students or employer partners. So when we saw that, we just kept going with it."[29]

Currently, I-WIN hosts monthly conversations on a variety of topics. Some months will spotlight a particular community's model and resources; other months will offer an "unrecorded, informal conversation where people can talk about an in-the-weeds topic," said Penczak.[30] She keeps some of the conversations unrecorded "so people can just say the thing they need in a protected space with peers."[31] Penczak typically follows up with a blog post surfacing lessons and resources shared from these conversations to ensure that the content is accessible to everyone in the network.

I-WIN has also recently started hosting in-person site visits that allow participants to see the work in action. "We went to Oswego Community High School recently, to see their in-house credit union, and took a group to Peoria [Illinois] for a site visit of CareerSpark, a hands-on career exploration event for more than 4,000 eighth-grade students," explained Penczak.[32]

A major focus of I-WIN is helping communities problem-solve common barriers to work-based learning. For example, internships in hospitals or other medical centers can be a powerful way to get young people engaged in the health field. However, Penczak explained, there's a common misconception "that you can't have students under [age] 18 in a hospital. So we bring in communities who have figured out how to do it. They explain how they worked with their local hospital employer to take students under [age] 18 through a [privacy law] HIPAA-compliant training process."[33]

Another common challenge communities face is helping marginalized students access work-based learning opportunities. Penczak said, "We don't have the answer for how to address every historically marginalized population in every community, but we have people come in and share what they're doing to address a gap in their community. They share really intentional recruiting strategies, for example, or how they're collecting and using data to understand who participates in these opportunities and who doesn't."[34] This kind of solution-sharing helps broaden the opportunities available to students across the state, as communities learn how to navigate barriers and create additional opportunities.

This work is not “one and done” — communities need ongoing, differentiated support

The localized needs of communities throughout Illinois are an ever-present reality for Penczak and her team as they cultivate resources and create sessions. “It’s difficult at times to have a network that’s trying to support the entire state,” she said, “because everything is different depending on your context.”[35] Factors such as the urbanicity of the community, the student populations they serve, and the local employer context vary widely from place to place. So too does the capacity of the staff in local school districts and the willingness and ability of employers to partner in this work.

In addition to regional differences, Penczak and her team must also differentiate the content based on individuals’ and communities’ experiences and comfort with implementing work-based learning. Penczak said, “We recently hosted a work-based learning 101 session. This launched four years ago, so I was really wondering whether people needed a 101-level session. But we had over 100 people register and about 70 show up.”[36] The need for this entry-level content stems from a growing number of districts offering work-based learning opportunities to students and the expanding portfolio of employer partners. In many cases districts and schools are creating new roles, such as work-based learning coordinator, to oversee these opportunities, and employers may be wading into partnerships with schools for the first time. Staff turnover in districts also plays a role in driving demand for entry-level content, as new staff may not be familiar with the ins and outs of work-based learning. These individuals can all benefit from introductory content, even as other communities may need much deeper or more specific support and problem-solving. Penczak and her team must continually balance their offerings to meet a wide variety of needs.

“Our engagements at both the state and community levels provide our team with a full picture of what’s happening and what people need to make I-WIN as successful as it is.”

Heather Penczak
Director of Innovation, EdSystems, Illinois

Penczak credited her team’s ability to meet these varied needs to their ongoing engagement with a variety of agencies and organizations focused on work-based learning. “We aren’t just engaged with people on the work-based learning issue through I-WIN,” she said. “Of course, I gather feedback from each of the sessions and ask what else they want to know about. But we’re also engaged across the state in other efforts. EdSystems works closely with our state agency partners to support policy development and implementation. At the same time, we’re deeply engaged with communities across the state to provide technical assistance on work-based learning as part of our college and career pathways supports. … Our engagements at both the state and community levels provide our team with a full picture of what’s happening and what people need to make I-WIN as successful as it is.”[37]

Sustained engagement with I-WIN resources is a primary indicator of success, while a lack of funding limits capacity

Penczak and her team at EdSystems measure I-WIN's success largely by session participation and engagement with the resources. She said, "We consider things like, are we able to get the resources that people have been asking for? Is attendance going up because we're putting out the right sessions, having the right conversations, and meeting the needs of communities? Are we increasing the number of resources we're able to share year to year? We're seeing continued session attendance, and we hear from people all the time that something they learned in a session or from a resource has made a difference to them and their students. So those things tell us we're being successful in important ways."[38]

Even as I-WIN sees sustained engagement, EdSystems is not receiving any project-specific funding to support the effort but has chosen to continue this work because of the clear need. Penczak said project funding would enable the team to do even more than they are already doing: "Ideally, we would hire a team member dedicated to I-WIN to be continuously fostering community with work-based learning leaders statewide, gathering and developing resources, and helping inform policy development relevant to work-based learning."[39]

As the state continues to focus on college and career preparation, I-WIN will continue to be a support for schools and communities

Ensuring young people are prepared for college and careers post-high school continues to be a focus for Illinois lawmakers and educators. In May 2022, Gov. JB Pritzker signed Public Act 102-0917, which builds on the PWR by requiring all districts serving students in grades 6-12 to adopt and implement career exploration and career development activities.[40] As a result, work-based learning will continue to be a focus area for educators across Illinois and resources, like those I-WIN cultivates, will be as valuable as ever.

KANSAS

Establishing a regional support structure through funding and collaboration

Criteria of Focus

- Dedicated state funding
- Statewide support infrastructure

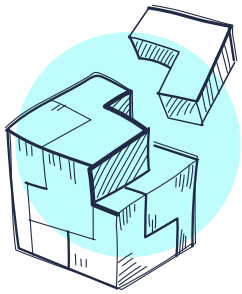
Key Takeaways

- Cross-agency partners collaborate to stand up a regional structure to support work-based learning.
- Strong partnerships, data collection, and sustained funding are keys to success.
- Robust local networks and frequent communication help overcome challenges.
- State leaders continue to define new opportunities, expectations, and resources for students.

Introduction

In 2019, Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly signed legislation to create the Governor's Council on Education.[41] The council brings together stakeholders in the education, child welfare, labor, advocacy, and business communities to "improve [the state's] schools, enhance workforce development, and stimulate economic growth in Kansas."[42] One of the early recommendations the council made was for work-based learning to "be implemented as a comprehensive policy approach to ensure Kansas students have … access to high-quality work-based learning experiences designed to prepare each student for postsecondary and workforce success … no matter what their ZIP code is," explained Natalie Clark, assistant director of CTE at the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE).[43]

Because of the state's renewed commitment to a comprehensive policy approach to work-based learning through the Governor's Council on Education, in 2019 KSDE used some of the state's Perkins V reserve funds to pilot a regional support structure for work-based learning. The three-year pilot concluded in 2021; based on the successful scale-up and strong regional structures, the council deemed the pilot successful. Today, more than three years after the conclusion of the pilot, the regional support structure is a permanent component of the state's approach to work-based learning. It is funded through an annual allocation from the Kansas Department of Commerce's (KDOC) Economic Development Initiatives Fund.



Cross-agency partners collaborate to stand up a regional structure to support work-based learning

There are five local workforce investment areas in Kansas, each overseen by a local workforce development board.[44] KSDE started with these five existing regions when it launched its work-based learning regional pilot in 2019. In each region, KSDE stood up a work-based learning support structure that included:

- One KSDE consultant to provide materials and support, and develop local relationships for work-based learning activities.
- One community college partner to support academics and provide technical assistance.
- One intermediary from the local workforce development board that connects local employers to the schools in the region and helps align local school curricula to workforce opportunities.

The goal of each regional team was to support local school districts to develop and offer work-based learning opportunities connected to local business needs. Regional teams prioritized developing opportunities in high-skill, high-wage, in-demand occupations.[45]

Six school districts — one in each of four regions and one region where two districts partnered — joined the initial pilot. In addition to the regional support team, each participating school district had its own work-based learning coordinator. The coordinator's role was to help students create personalized learning plans and connect students to aligned work-based learning opportunities.[46]

At the conclusion of the pilot in 2021, 25 school districts across all five regions were participating.[47] Participation has steadily increased since. As of school year (SY) 2022-23, these regional teams support 277 schools across 160 districts to offer work-based learning experiences to their students. Nearly 23,000 students across these schools participated, working at 3,711 businesses across 16 career pathways, from agriculture to transportation.[48]

Strong partnerships, data collection, and sustained funding are keys to success

Several factors have enabled Kansas' regional approach to work-based learning to be successful. The first is strong partnerships with a variety of organizations. Staff from each of the local workforce development boards "are available to assist schools statewide with work-based learning activities,"[49] ranging from providing classroom speakers and job preparation workshops to connecting students with employers and arranging internships or apprenticeships.[50] A recent partnership between KSDE and the Regional Educational Laboratory Central is helping Kansas strengthen electronic portfolios and goal-setting mechanisms that will support students to build individual plans of study, central to every student's work-based learning trajectory.[51]

Second, both the KDOC and the Kansas Department of Labor (KDOL) provide key data to inform the work of KSDE and the Governor's Council. KDOC staff and the Governor's Council meet regularly to review data, discuss progress, and align on future efforts. KSDE and KDOL meet regularly to discuss the state's 16 work-based learning career clusters.[52] This information includes job titles alongside the expected entry-level, median, and experienced-level wages.[53] KDOL has also turned this information into posters and guidebooks that KSDE has sent to each school district, supporting statewide information dissemination.[54]

Third, KDSE worked with its pilot districts to establish systems for documenting and analyzing information. Each KSDE consultant worked with the districts in their region to identify the number and types of work-based learning experiences available to students across grade levels.[55] KSDE also asked pilot schools to inventory students' individual plans of study (IPS) to identify what work-based learning experiences they were providing students from kindergarten through high school. These data enabled schools and districts to analyze "where their strengths are and the areas they wanted to improve,"[56] as well as supported strategic improvements such as seeking out business partnerships to fill gaps. This data collection and analysis has continued beyond the pilot. School districts participate in an annual IPS Spring Survey, reporting on work-based learning experiences and IPS implementation.

Finally, sustained funding from KDOC removes any concern about ongoing financial resources. The state has also signaled a willingness to provide funding for new work-based learning initiatives. For example, effective July 1, 2023, Gov. Kelly signed the Kansas Apprenticeship Act into law, establishing "a tax credit and grant incentive program for apprenticeships." The act established an incentive fund of $13 million per year for nonprofits and businesses that hire apprentices.[57]

Robust local networks and frequent communication help overcome challenges

One of the biggest challenges the state faced while piloting its regional support structure was the COVID-19 pandemic. State leaders had to move quickly and creatively to develop virtual work-based learning opportunities to keep the districts engaged with their regional intermediaries. They did so by using their connection points in each region to support students and districts in adapting to change. For example, the Kansas Hospital Association hosted a one-day virtual field trip where they went to hospitals and medical facilities around Kansas and had medical personnel talk about their roles. It was so popular it became an annual event, with more than 2,000 registered attendees in 2023.[58]

Clark also shared some logistical challenges Kansas faced during the pilot. In larger districts, it can be difficult to identify a well-matched placement for hundreds of interested students. And while student safety is a priority for all entities — schools, businesses, and intermediaries — it requires "a lot of paperwork and forms and a lot of learning" about how best to be both efficient and compliant.[59] Open and frequent communications among KSDE, other agencies, and its work-based learning coordinators embedded in each district help solve for these and other logistical challenges.

State leaders continue to define new opportunities, expectations, and resources for students

Looking ahead, KSDE is focused on ensuring all high school graduates have access to high-quality work-based learning experiences.

As regional work-based learning intermediaries have become a permanent fixture in the state, Kansas leaders are looking for other ways to increase students' access to work-based learning. In 2023, Kansas participated in a National Governors Association Policy Academy focused on youth apprenticeships.[60] This work led KDOC to create and fund an Office of Registered Apprenticeship to develop a program for internships and apprenticeships.[61] Representatives from other state departments including KSDE, KDOL, and the Board of Regents meet with KDOC regularly to support the development of the internship and apprenticeship program.[62]

Looking ahead, KSDE is focused on ensuring all high school graduates have access to high-quality work-based learning experiences. Beginning with the entering freshman class of SY24-25, each student must complete two postsecondary "assets" — such as apprenticeships, work-based learning experiences, or client-centered projects — before graduating.[63] Working with founding business sponsors, KSDE supported the launch of the HirePaths.com website designed to encourage students and their families to explore career opportunities through stories, videos, and activities.[64] These initiatives support the state's education vision: "Kansas leads the world in the success of each student."[65]

LOUISIANA

Using dual enrollment and accountability to advance work-based learning

Criteria of Focus

- Data collection
- Work-based learning as part of graduation requirements
- Work-based learning eligibility

Key Takeaways

- Strategic mapping of work-based learning opportunities, a phased implementation rollout, and updates to the student transcript system facilitate success.
- Trepidation about accountability changes and geographic barriers remain challenges.
- The state will continue to evolve its approach as expectations change for students after graduation.

Introduction

Over the past several years, Louisiana has advanced a work-based learning agenda through two main policy levers: the launch of the Fast Forward dual enrollment initiative and a revision to its accountability system to firmly embed work-based learning in school and district performance ratings.

In 2021, the Louisiana Board of Regents and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) approved the establishment of a new dual enrollment program called Fast Forward, in which students earn an associate degree or participate in an apprenticeship program while completing their diploma (Sidebar 2).[66] Fast Forward emerged from a goal that the Board of Regents and BESE set that, beginning with the class of 2025, all high school graduates in the state will complete high school with college credit and/or a postsecondary credential of value.[67] This goal recognizes that the majority of jobs in the state require more than a high school diploma and that high school students were not taking advantage of associate degree opportunities. In 2019, just 159 out of 42,650 Louisiana high school graduates earned both a diploma and an associate degree.[68]

In 2024, Louisiana also unveiled a major revision of its statewide accountability system — called “Grow, Achieve, Thrive” — which for the first time embedded work-based learning as part of school accountability ratings.[69] The third pillar of this accountability system, “Thrive,” focuses on ensuring that students are prepared to succeed after high school — classifying students as university accelerators, service accelerators, or career accelerators. The career accelerator area includes an eight-year phased-in implementation of work-based learning. Beginning with school performance scores in 2026, schools will earn five bonus points on their accountability rating if they reach a goal of having 25% of career accelerator students complete a work-based learning experience (e.g., apprenticeship, internship, and/or industry-recognized credential).[70] Each following year the goal will grow by 5% until it reaches 65%, after which the accountability requirement will go into full effect and the bonus points will be removed.

Also in 2024, BESE updated and clarified its work-based learning policy in several ways, such as expanding the definition of work-based learning experiences to include structured, on-the-job training as part of a registered apprenticeship; requiring compensation for students participating in internships; clarifying the required amount of time students should spend in the classroom versus in on-the-job training; and outlining teacher certification requirements for work-based learning.[71]

Strategic mapping of work-based learning opportunities, a phased implementation rollout, and updates to the student transcript system facilitate success

Several factors have supported Louisiana's work-based learning initiatives and especially its expansion of registered apprenticeship opportunities. Currently, the Fast Forward apprenticeship pathway includes five registered apprenticeship opportunities with industry partners: three in the skilled trades, one with a school system, and another in the IT sector.[72] To grow registered apprenticeship opportunities, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has been carrying out a strategic mapping of apprenticeship opportunities, hiring a new staff member to lead this work.[73] As Jessica Vallelungo, deputy assistant superintendent in the Office of Career and College Readiness at LDOE, explained, "LDOE is working directly with the Louisiana Workforce Commission [LWC] to map out the actual physical locations of where training happens for the registered apprenticeships … and look at where the actual geographical gaps in high-quality access to these CTE programs are."[74] Ideally, the state will be able to use community college and high school facilities to help fill in any gaps. LDOE staff are also working to identify new registered apprenticeships that are willing to onboard young people prior to high school graduation and bring them into the system to expand opportunities further.

Sidebar 2: Louisiana's Fast Forward Pathways

Fast Forward students spend grades 9-10 on their high school campus and earn core graduation requirements. Once they reach grades 11-12, students spend the majority of their time on a postsecondary campus or a satellite location while they are dually enrolled in courses or completing an apprenticeship. There are three tracks in the program:

1. **Jumpstart 2.0 Pathway**: This pathway allows students to explore a range of careers and postsecondary pathways. Students in this pathway earn a technical associate degree that can lead directly to a career as well as a merit scholarship to community and technical colleges.

2. **TOPS University Pathway**: This pathway allows students to earn a universal transfer degree to any state university or technical associate degree while also earning a merit scholarship diploma for state university attendance.

3. **High-Demand Apprenticeship Pathway**: This pathway allows students to complete a registered apprenticeship approved by the LWC.

State leaders have developed Fast Forward career pathways across eight regions in Louisiana to address economic forecasts for high-wage, high-demand jobs in each labor market area. There are currently 39 offerings, including associate degrees and registered apprenticeships in sectors like IT, manufacturing, engineering, and education.[75]

LDOE staff also recognize the importance of a phased rollout of work-based learning in the state, affording time for local school systems to embed work-based learning into their education offerings, establish proof points that build momentum, and strengthen business buy-in. “We’re not … turning on the switch and requiring it of all students [immediately]. We have an eight-year runway to ramp up because we know that we need an even greater level of business participation,” Vallelungo said.[76]

Cross-agency collaboration has also been a driver of success in Louisiana, with staff recognizing that it will be difficult to move the state forward working in silos. LDOE staff have regular (currently biweekly) meetings with LWC to support the accountability rollout, monthly touchpoints with the Board of Regents, and monthly meetings with the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, among others. In supporting the new accountability system, Louisiana is also able to use its already robust and comprehensive student transcript system. The system currently collects student enrollment data at the course level, and each year school systems upload a “massive file” on each student’s curricular activities.[77] As the state expands its accountability system, LDOE’s data analytics team is working to build new data elements into the system to better track students’ work-based learning experiences and outcomes.[78]

Trepidation about accountability changes and geographic barriers remain challenges

As Louisiana embeds work-based learning in its accountability system, one of the most significant challenges is helping stakeholders feel supported while combating “the fear that comes from changing things.”[79] As Ashley Townsend, deputy chief of policy at LDOE, pointed out, this concern is particularly prevalent among school leaders. State leaders have been trying to convey that changes in accountability merely reflect changing expectations. “If your [accountability] scores decline and your community thinks your school isn’t doing as well as they should be, it’s really because of the changing expectations for what kids should be able to do at the end of high school,” according to Townsend.[80] Throughout it all, the state has adopted a supportive, flexible, and solutions-oriented approach to help schools and districts work through implementation challenges.

A second challenge has to do with the geographic differences across the state. In a rural state like Louisiana, some communities are located far away from the nearest apprenticeship opportunity or community college. As the state carries out its strategic mapping of apprenticeship opportunities, it hopes to alleviate some of these challenges by bringing on new industry partners and leveraging its community college network. Furthermore, the state is currently working to expand access to high-speed internet, which would open more opportunities for students to engage in online experiences.

The state will continue to evolve its approach as expectations change for students after graduation

"The goal of high school has to be to get [students] ready for the next thing. … We need to make sure that we're creating graduates that [businesses are] excited to employ."

Ashley Townsend
Deputy Chief of Policy, LDOE, Louisiana

Louisiana's recent efforts to launch and expand Fast Forward and embed work-based learning as part of its accountability system have established a strong foundation from which to grow in the years to come. As Townsend noted, these changes are necessary to reflect the shifting realities of education and workforce in the 21st century. "There's been this perception that the goal of high school is to merely finish, and that's not the case. The goal of high school has to be to get [students] ready for the next thing. … We need to make sure that we're creating graduates that [businesses are] excited to employ."[81] As Louisiana continues to strengthen its work-based learning offerings, it remains focused on ensuring that the K-12 system serves as a talent developer preparing students for productive careers.

MAINE

Using COVID-relief dollars to expand extended learning opportunities and build a next generation workforce

Criteria of Focus

- Dedicated state funding

Key Takeaways

- Flexible state funding and investments in human capital underpin successful ELO expansion.
- Funding and payments, administrative burden, and transportation remain challenges.
- The positive impacts of ELO expansion will outlive time-bound grant funds.

Introduction

Maine has made significant strides in expanding CTE and work-based learning opportunities. The state launched a 10-year strategy for improving work-based learning and created a new office, the Office of Workforce Development and Innovation Pathways, to house that work. One of the most significant catalysts for recent growth has been the use of COVID-19 pandemic relief dollars to expand the state's Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) program. The ELO program has existed in Maine for almost a decade, offering hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the traditional classroom, including paid work experiences, that provide valuable workforce skills and create meaningful connections to employers in the state.[82] In 2022, Gov. Janet Mills dedicated $5.6 million to expanding ELOs as part of the Maine Career Exploration (MCE) Program, a two-year pilot grant funded by a portion of the state's COVID-19 dollars aimed at connecting 6,000 young people ages 16-24 to Maine's economy.[83]

Flexible state funding and investments in human capital underpin successful ELO expansion

With the MCE program's $5.6 million in funding for ELOs, the Maine Department of Education (MDE) awarded grants of up to $250,000 to 26 ELO programs across the state, including 19 new programs and seven existing programs.[84] Local education agencies (LEAs) had considerable flexibility over the use of these funds. They could use the money to develop in-person, remote, or hybrid offerings; personalize opportunities and supports for students; or connect to relevant business needs in their community. They could also provide compensation for students participating in the program — which helped incentivize and enable employers to participate in the program as well as expand opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. After hearing there was interest among grantees in extending their investment timelines, MDE extended the timeline of the grant, allowing recipients to stretch their funding to a third or even fourth year.[85]

Investments in human capital and relationship-building have also been critical to implementation success. Many grantees used the money to hire ELO coordinators, who work at school and community sites and play a critical role in connecting students and employers and ensuring positive experiences for both sides.[86] Rick Wilson, ELO specialist at MDE who also serves as the ELO coordinator at Brunswick High School in Brunswick, Maine, noted the importance of the coordinator role, especially as guidance counselors have seen their responsibilities shift over the years away from career advising.[87] He also emphasized the importance of ELO coordinators in building relationships across the state, describing how ELO connections often arise from simple conversations and awareness about opportunities in a community.[88] An interim evaluation report found that almost all employers "identified initial and ongoing support from a program coordinator as instrumental to their successful recruitment and engagement in the MCE program."[89] Similarly, student testimonials indicate that ELO coordinators are key to supporting their experiences and helping them feel motivated, engaged, and resilient in the face of challenges.[90]

Funding and payments, administrative burden, and transportation remain challenges

One of the challenges facing Maine's ELO program is the limited duration of funding. Maine's expansion of ELOs has been funded by pandemic relief dollars, and grantees' funds only last for four years. The time-bound nature of the grant has occasionally led to schools being reluctant to invest in expensive long-term infrastructure and personnel hires in support of ELOs.[91] The lack of infrastructure investments is also evident in the challenges some LEAs experienced processing student payments for work.[92] However, as federal grant funds expire, state leaders have begun to plan a new state-funded grant program that will keep the momentum going.

As federal grant funds expire, state leaders have begun to plan a new state-funded grant program that will keep the momentum going.

The MCE evaluation report also documented occasional instances where low-income students experienced a negative effect from participating in paid work-based learning experiences when that additional income caused a temporary increase in overall household resources that in turn reduced their family's eligibility for housing assistance.[93] In some cases, fear of a reduction in public benefits prevented youth from participating in the program. It was not clear, however, how widespread this issue might be, if these impacts might extend to other public benefits programs, or if there are some easy adjustments that could be made to Maine's housing assistance policy to alleviate this risk.[94]

State officials are also seeking ways to reduce the administrative burden of establishing ELO opportunities, paying students, and partnering with businesses. Wilson pointed specifically to the difficulties that some districts have faced trying to launch grant-funded apprenticeship programs or partner with neighboring schools and districts on an ELO program.[95] Challenges include the vast amounts of paperwork that districts have to complete, state and local approval protocols for new initiatives, the small size of many school and district offices in a rural state, and the difficulty of securing buy-in among necessary school leaders.[96] Easing the administrative burden is especially important at a time when businesses are short-staffed and unsure if they have the resources to participate in ELO and support and supervise young workers.

According to Wilson, though, "The biggest challenge is transportation, transportation, transportation."[97] Maine is a rural state with limited public transportation, meaning that many ELO students can struggle to get to job sites. While the state has allowed grant funding to be used to pay for driver's education and related expenses for certain students, a lack of vehicles is the larger challenge. Students who have access to a vehicle (either their own, or a parent/guardian who can drive them) are better able to take advantage of ELO opportunities than students who do not. Some LEAs have used their ELO dollars to fund transportation for students, such as buses or courtesy vans, but since there is also a shortage of bus drivers, transportation remains a significant challenge.[98]

The positive impacts of ELO expansion will outlive time-bound grant funds

Maine's investments in ELOs have already started to yield fruit, according to evaluation data. Over the past two years, MDE staff and site-based ELO coordinators have partnered with researchers at the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine to collect and analyze data related to program implementation and outcomes, drawing on a variety of survey, interview, and focus group data as well as administrative records.[99] They track information including the number of student participants, paid and unpaid work experiences, credits (core and elective) earned, new business and community partnerships formed, and engagements between students and business and community partners. Data show that, over the past two years, 3,374 students completed a total of 1,861 paid work experiences (including 1,290 for credit), that students had 6,667 total engagements with business partners, and that ELO programs built 1,992 new community and business partnerships.[100] Perhaps more importantly, ELO participants gained a number of academic, social-emotional, and professional benefits.[101]

While funding for the ELO expansion may not persist beyond the MCE grant, the investments it has spurred, its impact on students, and the relationships it has forged among schools, businesses, and community partners are likely to continue to pay dividends down the road. "The people [component] will be the legacy of this money," Wilson said. "The people who have carried out these programs and have made these great connections … and [their work is] making a difference."[102]

MARYLAND

Advancing innovative work-based learning opportunities for special populations of students

Criteria of Focus

- Access for all
- Data collection
- Use of data to drive access for all

Key Takeaways

- Cross-agency collaboration, significant funding, and the attention of policymakers have enabled the expansion of work-based learning offerings.
- Data and evaluation improve programming and address challenges.
- Favorable policy conditions prime Maryland for further progress.

Introduction

Over the past several years, Maryland has advanced a work-based learning agenda focused on ensuring all students have access to opportunities and the supports they need to succeed, particularly for students with disabilities. Since 2017, the state has launched three innovative grant programs designed to expand and strengthen work-based learning: the Way2Work pilot project, the Maryland Pathways to Partnership Initiative (MPPI), and Maryland Works (Table 3). Together, these initiatives have helped bolster work-based learning infrastructure, pilot innovations, and foster learning about various challenges.

A key motivator for the state's most recent initiatives was the 2021 enactment of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Blueprint),[103] which increases P-16 funding by $3.8 billion over 10 years and prescribes new policies and programs designed to reduce gaps.[104] Pillar 3 of the Blueprint set new college and career readiness standards that included strengthening CTE and work-based learning offerings for students.[105] Specifically, it sets a goal of increasing the number of apprenticeships for high school juniors and seniors to 60,000 and ensuring that at least 45% of high school students in Maryland complete an apprenticeship or industry credential by SY30-31.[106] This is an ambitious goal given that only 7% of high school students in the state completed an apprenticeship or industry credential in 2022.[107] To support efforts to achieve this goal, the Blueprint established a new CTE committee within the Governor's Workforce Development Board — comprising members of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Maryland Department of Labor, Maryland Department of Commerce, the Higher Education Commission, labor organizations, and trade associations — that sets yearly progress goals toward the 45% target.

Table 3. Maryland's recent work-based learning initiatives

Program	Years	Description
Way2Work Pilot Project	2017-2022	A five-year, $7.5 million initiative funded by a federal Rehabilitation Services Administration grant.[108] It was led by the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), the University of Maryland, and Mathematica Policy Research and focused on testing and evaluating promising school-to-work transition practices for students with disabilities.[109] Students with individualized education programs or 504 plans were eligible to participate. They received early engagement with DORS pre-employment transition services; a minimum of three work-based learning experiences; and wraparound support from coordinated local interagency teams.[110] A total of 200 students across eight LEAs received enhanced services through the program.[111]
MPPI	2023-Present	A $9.9 million initiative funded by a federal Disability Innovation Fund grant that aims to enhance transition services for youth with disabilities.[112] Managed by DORS, the grant supports collaborative partnerships, resource sharing, and data exchange across state agencies and local partners; bolsters pre-employment transition services for students; delivers enhanced career counseling and work-based learning experiences to students; and embeds culturally responsive practices into services.
Maryland Works Grant	2023-2024	A $12 million grant program funded by pandemic relief dollars designed to expand Maryland's apprenticeship infrastructure and deepen the quality of apprenticeship offerings.[113] It provided funding to support LEA innovation with apprenticeship opportunities and launch apprenticeship intermediaries. Each grantee focused on a different apprenticeship challenge, such as tackling transportation barriers, supporting special populations of students, or facilitating strong industry-school connections across the state.[114] State leaders plan to codify best practices learned from these initiatives and develop playbooks that will support statewide learning and scaling in the future.[115]

Cross-agency collaboration, significant funding, and the attention of policymakers have enabled the expansion of work-based learning offerings

Across all these initiatives, several factors stand out as critical in supporting work-based learning progress and expanding access to students. First, there is a strong spirit of cross-agency collaboration in Maryland, with different state and local agencies, community partners, and schools working together to streamline and enhance supports for historically marginalized students as exemplified by the Way2Work project's cross-sector wraparound supports. These initiatives have also benefited from various funding streams (including approximately $30 million in federal innovation grants and pandemic relief dollars), which have allowed the state to launch new programs, evaluate them, and apply learnings to future endeavors.

Furthermore, the policy environment in Maryland has become more supportive of work-based learning in recent years with the 2021 enactment of the Blueprint and more recent state protections against age discrimination toward young people in apprenticeship hiring.[116] Richard Kincaid, senior executive director of college and career pathways at MSDE, noted the importance of the latter in particular: "In Maryland, it's now discriminatory to use age as a factor, beginning at age 16. If you have an opening, and it's an apprenticeship, and we have a 16-year-old high school student who's able to perform the tasks, they cannot be discriminated against simply because they are young. And we have an attorney general that is ready and willing for the first test case."[117]

State leaders are also paying a high level of attention to work-based learning. When asked how work-based learning ranks on the state's list of priorities, Kincaid replied, "On a scale of 1 to 10, it's a 12. It is the absolute perfect time to be doing this work."[118] He noted: "Oftentimes, you have either a policy decision that's been made but no funding for it, or you have funding but there's no policy requirement for schools and employers to do much of anything. [But in Maryland,] we have exceptional funding support [and] we have state agencies that are working in lockstep. We have a governor who's doubling down on providing apprenticeship opportunities. We have commissions that have been created to help drive recommendations to the state legislature."[119]

> ***"[In Maryland,] we have exceptional funding support [and] we have state agencies that are working in lockstep. We have a governor who's doubling down on providing apprenticeship opportunities. We have commissions that have been created to help drive recommendations to the state legislature."***
>
> **Richard Kincaid**
> *Senior Executive Director of College and Career Pathways, MSDE, Maryland*

Data and evaluation improve programming and address challenges

Evaluation and continuous learning have been major components of Maryland's recent initiatives, allowing state leaders to learn about both successes and challenges. While it is still too early to have evidence of impact from the more recent initiatives, evaluation data of the Way2Work project show that the program was implemented with fidelity, connecting student participants to DORS services and work-based learning experiences and encouraging closer coordination among service providers.[120] Student participants engaged more with DORS services than nonparticipants (including DORS support with applying for jobs, help while working at a job, and life skills development opportunities), and they were also more likely to complete high school within two years of program enrollment.[121] However, the program did not seem to affect postsecondary enrollment outcomes, employment outcomes, or the expectations that students and families had for their career prospects after graduation.[122]

These mixed results led the state to examine what gaps might still be present in their support system for these students and where resources should be strategically deployed moving forward. As Kincaid explained, "One of the key areas that we recognized we needed to lean a little bit further into was on the employer engagement side. You can prepare students for amazing opportunities, but if there's no place for them to move into the world of work because you haven't done that employer engagement side, or you haven't developed employers to be ready to receive these students, the benefits won't appear."[123]

While the state has made progress in expanding work-based learning opportunities, data also suggest that there are differences across communities in terms of how money is distributed and spent programmatically. Kincaid noted that rural communities often lack easy access to work-based learning opportunities, especially outside the District of Columbia suburbs, and opportunities are not evenly distributed.[124] Transportation is another major challenge. Many students lack access to vehicles, and parents are concerned about their teenagers driving long distances to get to a job site.[125] Transportation poses a particularly significant challenge in the Eastern Shore region of Maryland, where public transportation is largely nonexistent.

Favorable policy conditions prime Maryland for further progress

While Maryland has a long way to go in reaching its SY30-31 goal of having 45% of high school students complete an apprenticeship or industry credential, the state is making rapid progress in building out work-based learning infrastructure and advancing access and success for students. Just as important, the state context appears primed for significant work-based learning growth in the years ahead. A longtime veteran of CTE leadership, Kincaid reflected on the present moment, concluding, “The stars have truly aligned in Maryland in ways that I’ve never quite seen before. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for work-based learning in our state.”[126]

NEW MEXICO

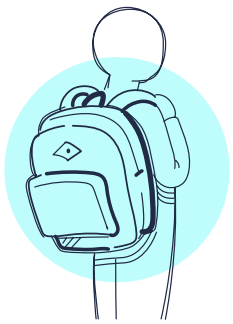
Using funding and collaboration to build college and career readiness

Criteria of Focus

- Dedicated state funding
- Statewide support infrastructure

Key Takeaways

- Sustained funding and statewide support drive expansion of work-based learning opportunities.
- Ongoing challenges include data collection, logistical issues, and geography.
- Continued funding, new policies, and ongoing collaboration underpin future progress.



Introduction

New Mexico's work-based learning experiences are overseen by the Public Education Department's College and Career Readiness Bureau (CCRB) in partnership with the Department of Workforce Solutions (DWS). Since 2019, these organizations have launched three work-based learning initiatives: a Summer Enrichment Internship Program, Innovation Zones, and a Near Peer Tutoring Program (Table 4). Dramatic increases in state funding for work-based learning, coupled with stronger statewide support infrastructure, have enabled these programs to grow. As of 2024, these programs reach more than 6,000 students combined.[127]

Sustained funding and statewide support drive expansion of work-based learning opportunities

In 2018, the First Judicial District Court of New Mexico ruled that the state had failed to meet its obligation to students, particularly those in traditionally underserved subpopulations, to be college and career ready upon high school graduation. Following this ruling, lawmakers increased the education budget by $1.3 billion over the next five years.[128] This included substantial increases to funding for CTE and work-based learning programs, such as:

- Increasing funding for CTE from $3 million in 2019 to more than $40 million by 2024 (Perkins V funding represents roughly $10 million of that total).[129]
- An additional $8 million in state funds in 2024 to support the Summer Enrichment Internship Program, on top of the initial nearly $10 million of COVID-19 pandemic funding received in 2021.[130]
- $2 million in combined Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and state funds during SY23-24 for the Near Peer Tutoring program.[131]

While both the Summer Enrichment Internship Program and the Near Peer Tutoring Program were initially funded through ESSER, New Mexico will provide ongoing funding for both programs through FY26 at a minimum since ESSER funds expired in September 2024. This critical funding demonstrates state leaders' ongoing commitment to these programs and to work-based learning more broadly.[132]

Table 4. New Mexico's recent work-based learning initiatives

Program	Year Enacted	Description	Scale
Summer Enrichment Internship Program[133]	2021	This program provides high school students with the opportunity to participate in high-quality summer internships in government agencies and community organizations, including county, municipal, and tribal placements. It includes funding to cover program costs and compensation for participating students.	2,741 students and 500 mentors participated in summer 2023 (up from 1,304 students and 300 mentors in summer 2021).[134]
Innovation Zones	2022	This initiative provides districts and charter schools with funding and support to "transform education with grassroots solutions using wisdom from local communities."[135] Participating districts implement a set of innovative practices, one of which is creating "meaningful and relevant curriculum and instruction grounded in community"[136] through work-based learning opportunities.	2,449 students attending Innovation Schools participated in an internship during SY23-24.[137]
Near Peer Tutoring Program[138]	2022 (Spring)	This program allows LEAs to apply for funding to establish paid tutoring opportunities for high school students working with middle and elementary school students. This creates a pipeline for educators by supporting the professional development of students considering teaching as a career pathway.	1,000 students participated as of SY23-24.

In addition to funding, New Mexico leaders have focused on building statewide support for work-based learning through two avenues. The first is a strong partnership with Future Focused Education, an Albuquerque-based nonprofit that partners with local communities and individuals to "design schools that are suited to the particular needs of their community."[139] Future Focused Education provides the state with consulting and technical support on all three work-based learning initiatives and acts as an intermediary between schools and communities by connecting schools and students with work-based learning opportunities.[140] Marc Duske, CCRB special programs manager, noted that Future Focused Education has helped connect a high percentage of students in the Innovation Zone schools to internship activities.[141]

New Mexico will provide ongoing funding for both programs. … This critical funding demonstrates state leaders' ongoing commitment to these programs and to work-based learning more broadly.

State education leaders are also working to build statewide support by fostering collaboration across agencies and institutions. One example is Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's recent appointment of Rob Black as cabinet secretary of the Economic Development Department. Black was recently president and CEO of the New Mexico State Chamber of Commerce, and he organized a September 2024 meeting to bring a variety of stakeholders "to the table for the state's legislative planning strategy … to discuss funding initiatives and priorities for work-based learning."[142] Attendees included the state's Economic Development Department, Public Education Department, Higher Education Department, and DWS. Another example is CCRB and DWS working together to support Innovation Zones and other work-based learning experiences by creating a community of practice available to any interested party in the state, including school districts and industry partners. The community of practice provides a forum for sharing best practices, new approaches, and content expertise, and it attracted more than 80 registrants.[143]

Ongoing challenges include data collection, logistical issues, and geography

Even with substantial funding and strengthened statewide infrastructure to support work-based learning efforts, New Mexico's education leaders are still grappling with three challenges: a lack of robust data systems, logistical issues, and meeting the needs of rural communities. On the data front, New Mexico is working to build the quantitative data collection systems needed to demonstrate the widespread impact of the work-based learning initiatives and bolster the case for sustained state funding. While early anecdotes and qualitative assessments signal success, Duske noted that "quantitative data offer a more objective view of the relative success or weakness of a particular funded initiative."[144] Although comprehensive, disaggregated data on all work-based learning and career-connected programming is a goal for the future, the data the state does have suggest that the programs are having a positive impact. Alexandra Lutz, CCRB deputy director, pointed to a significant correlation between career-connected learning and graduation rates. While the overall state graduation rate is around 76%, Lutz reported that "[CTE] concentrators have a 95% or higher graduation rate."[145] Duske acknowledged the importance of the state to commit funding for initiatives, despite the lack of initial data.[146]

The state has also faced some common logistical issues in supporting work-based learning initiatives. It struggles with issues similar to those in other states, such as transportation, establishing safety protocols, and balancing paperwork requirements. Staff capacity is another challenge. As state funding for CTE ballooned from $3 million to $40 million, CCRB hired only one additional staff member.

Finally, New Mexico faces the challenge of building a statewide network of opportunities given its rurality. Nearly 30% of its districts serve fewer than 200 students, with approximately a dozen high schools graduating less than 10 students per year.[147] In areas with "one or two people per square mile," Lutz explained, it is difficult for someone "to imagine a job you've never heard of or you've never seen," especially when you do not want to leave your community.[148]

Continued funding, new policies, and ongoing collaboration underpin future progress

Building on the 2018 mandate to improve college and career readiness for all students, the New Mexico Legislature has committed the funding necessary to support CCRB programs. The 2025 budget for work-based learning programs exceeds $40 million.[149] Moreover, in 2023, the state adopted new graduation requirements that allow CTE electives, internships, work-based learning, or other project-based classes to count toward core course requirements. These go into effect for students beginning in grade 9 as of SY25-26.[150] In addition, continued collaboration with internal and external partners creates a strong network of support. As Cruz noted, "Any form of collaboration that you can incorporate [is beneficial so] it doesn't have to feel like you're on an island all on your own."[151]

NORTH CAROLINA

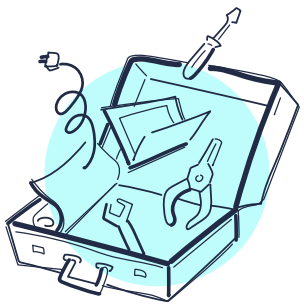
Driving information and access through state leadership

Criteria of Focus

- Access for all
- Work-based learning communications infrastructure

Key Takeaways

- Collaboration among state agencies drives the creation of new opportunities and directs resources to support students' access.
- Streamlined and centralized resources provide consistent, accessible information to all stakeholders.
- State-level leadership facilitates work-based learning and eases the implementation burden on local communities.



Introduction

North Carolina state law requires all students to have a career development plan in place by the time they leave eighth grade[152] and all local boards of education to offer at least two work-based learning opportunities for high school students.[153] These provisions have led to an increased focus on work-based learning across the state and an expansion of opportunities for students.

Amid the large and growing work-based learning landscape, state leaders are focused on two priority areas: increasing the number of work-based learning opportunities and improving students' access to them, and establishing a centralized work-based learning communications infrastructure.

Collaboration among state agencies drives the creation of new opportunities and directs resources to support students' access

Several state-level agencies and organizations, including the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI), the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE), the Office of the Governor, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, and the North Carolina Community College System, collaborate closely to define the state's work-based learning priorities and co-create resources to support its implementation on the ground.

Currently, state leaders are focused on scaling pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities. With funding from the federal Apprenticeship Building America program, NCBCE (a business-led organization operating out of the Office of the Governor) developed Career Launch, a statewide youth apprenticeship system that connects pre-apprenticeships to registered apprenticeship programs throughout the state.[154] Through a close partnership among NCBCE, local school districts, and the state's community

college system,[155] Career Launch focuses on expanding pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships in five key industry areas aligned to the state's workforce needs: advanced manufacturing, clean energy, early childhood education, health care, and IT/cybersecurity.[156] Hundreds of students across the state have participated in these opportunities over the past few years. The North Carolina Clean Energy Apprenticeship Program, for example, trains approximately 60 pre-apprentices and apprentices each year. It is currently in its fifth year of operation and has a goal of reaching 1,000 young people by 2026.[157] The Building Bright Futures early childhood education apprenticeship program trained 379 pre-apprentices and apprentices during its initial pilot in 2023.[158]

State-level organizations are also helping to address another common challenge: identifying employer partners. NCBCE has a direct connection to business and industry throughout the state. Morgan Crawford, deputy director at NCBCE, explained that the organization works with employers to develop and implement work-based learning opportunities. They've worked with technology company Lenovo, for example, to build the Ready, Set, App! challenge,[159] a program in which teams of high school students build apps; the finalist teams pitch their apps in person at Lenovo's Morrisville, North Carolina headquarters.[160]

Beyond creating new opportunities, North Carolina agencies have also dedicated resources to eliminating financial barriers for students and encouraging participation in pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships. Since 2016, students who complete a registered pre-apprenticeship and transition to a registered apprenticeship within 120 days of graduating from high school are eligible for a tuition waiver for the duration of their training — ultimately resulting in a free certification or degree.[161] NCBCE also uses some of its federal grant dollars to offset financial burdens that students may face. Crawford said, "We use grant funding for completion stipends and to support wraparound services. For example, if a student needs transportation or a uniform, we have funding to make those purchases. There is also a mentor stipend built in to support the work it takes on the employer side, and we can cover some of the employer's [human resources] costs."[162]

By leveraging their financial resources and connections to employers, state leaders are working to ensure local communities have what they need to create, implement, and support students to access work-based learning opportunities that will set them up for success post-high school.

Streamlined and centralized resources provide consistent, accessible information to all stakeholders

As the various agencies involved in North Carolina's work-based learning programs are focused on creating new opportunities and reducing barriers to access, they are simultaneously working to improve communication about those opportunities with all stakeholders. In particular, state leaders have focused on developing centralized resources where stakeholders can access information about work-based learning. DPI recently updated its work-based learning manual, which offers guidance for schools and districts looking to implement work-based learning.[163] DPI also provides professional development for educators, including bimonthly webinars that highlight different youth apprenticeship models across the state. "We encourage schools and employers to present their successes and discuss how they overcome obstacles, along with sharing inspiring stories," said Jeanne Turner, work-based learning consultant at DPI.[164] Finally, in collaboration with the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services at North Carolina State University, DPI also operates a CTE Moodle — a free, virtual professional learning community.[165] Through the Moodle, North Carolina's K-12 CTE educators can find a variety of resources, courses, and communication about CTE and work-based learning, as well as access a network of CTE professionals across the state.

In addition to professional development and training for teachers, DPI has "made an intentional effort to include all of the work-based learning options in our middle and high school curriculum products," explained Linda Lay, section chief for credentials and support services at DPI. "We have developed a new series of courses that are focusing on each of our pathways. In each of those modules, we've included a section on work-based learning so students are aware of the options." DPI has also worked to clearly define and distinguish among internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships, to ensure students and teachers understand the differences and can identify the right opportunity to match a student's goals.[166]

"This has been one of the best things we've done, having a single point of contact, who is the 'conductor' of all things work-based learning."

Linda Lay
Section Chief, Credentials and Support Services, DPI, North Carolina

To further facilitate the centralization of information, DPI hired Turner to be the state's work-based learning "conductor," said Lay. "This has been one of the best things we've done, having a single point of contact, who is the 'conductor' of all things work-based learning. … We have one central point of contact for anyone who has a work-based learning question, be it a teacher in the classroom, or a district leader, or a business."[167]

Finally, state leaders are continuing to improve the Navigator, an online platform where educators and employers can connect to identify and create work-based learning opportunities.[168] DPI and NCBCE, in partnership with Fidelity Investments, created and launched the Navigator in 2018. In its first two years of implementation, the Navigator engaged more than 75,000 teachers and nearly 400 businesses with 667 work-based learning opportunities.[169] DPI and NCBCE have continued to make updates to the platform, releasing Navigator 3.0 in spring 2022 with new features aimed at better meeting the needs of stakeholders, especially employers.

State-level leadership facilitates work-based learning and eases the implementation burden on local communities

At the foundation of all the work-based learning activity happening in North Carolina is the high degree of collaboration among state agencies. This collaboration "has been key to all of the work-based learning work we're doing. It has elevated it all to a higher level," noted Crawford.[170]

Moreover, as Lay explained, the work that state leaders are doing to create structures and partnerships results in an easing of the burden on students, schools, and employers. She said, "There is a perception that this process is too hard, that people don't have time to build the necessary frameworks and relationships to ensure success. So, we're trying to clear some of the obstacles to make it as easy as possible. By establishing common practices and procedures, teachers, directors, and employers will have a clean, clear-cut path to make these important work-based learning opportunities for students become a reality."[171]

WASHINGTON

Strengthening a statewide approach to career-connected learning

Criteria of Focus

- Statewide support infrastructure
- Dedicated state and federal funding
- Financial incentives

Key Takeaways

- Identification of "sector leaders" creates sector-specific strategies and coherence.
- Grant funding catalyzes the development of career-connected programming.
- A formalized public-private leadership model will ensure long-term program stability.
- Federal grant funds and centralized resources support future growth.

Introduction

In 2017, Gov. Jay Inslee launched the Career Connect Washington initiative, a public-private partnership aimed at helping significantly more students pursue good-paying jobs after high school through career-ready education such as registered apprenticeships and technical training programs.[172] Over two years, a cross-agency task force met with key stakeholder groups to explore their needs and find opportunities to connect Washington's young people with high-demand, high-wage jobs.[173] The task force released a set of recommendations in 2018, which offered a framework and strategic approach for creating a statewide system for career-connected learning.[174] In 2019, the Legislature passed the Workforce Education Investment Act,[175] which established and funded the Career Connect Washington system based on those recommendations. Career Connect Washington set a goal that 60% of young adults, beginning with the class of 2030, will participate in a Career Launch program (Sidebar 3).[176]

In its first five years, Career Connect Washington has issued grants to build 183 career-connected learning programs. In total, 9,717 students have completed a Career Launch or Registered Apprenticeship program in the state. Many more have engaged in a Career Explore or Prep experience, though Career Connect Washington is still in the process of developing a data collection system for those programs.

As Career Connect Washington has grown and evolved beyond its initial regional infrastructure, three initiatives have helped the state expand offerings, engage employers, and reach more young people:

- The identification and implementation of sector leaders and sector-specific strategies.
- The disbursement of program building grants.
- The formal transition to a public-private partnership leadership model.

Today, with a network of regional and sector leaders in place, Career Connect Washington aims to "bridge the gap between employers and educators by providing the connection, funding, and support they need to deliver high-quality academic and work-based experiences for Washington students."[177]

Identification of "sector leaders" creates sector-specific strategies and coherence

Employer engagement is crucial to Career Connect Washington's success. In 2021, Career Connect Washington leaders spoke with dozens of employers and associations to understand the program's penetration across industries and identify barriers and opportunities for improvement.[178] Through this employer engagement, Career Connect Washington identified a "sector leader" in each of 10 high-demand sectors (Table 5). Sector leaders are tasked with engaging and coordinating across employers within their sector. All sector leaders develop and update "a strategy and recommendations to meet the workforce needs of employers in their sector through targeted expansion and development of career-connected learning programs."[179] Career Connect Washington provides each sector leader a grant to support this work.

Ingrid Stegemoeller, industry engagement director at Partnership for Learning, said this approach is "working really well. … It has allowed each sector to start with their sector's unique baseline of programming, identify where they need to build out programs to meet employer talent needs, and then scale those programs in a coherent way."[180] For example, Stegemoeller explained that the finance sector leader, Washington Bankers Association (WBA), had previously been working with an outside organization to run training for entry-level finance positions. The Career Connect Washington sector leader grant enabled it to bring the training in-house, which has positioned WBA to support the integration of this training into CTE coursework available to Washington students, building the future workforce their member employers need. As another example, Washington's Agriculture & Natural Resource Center of Excellence is focused on using its deep employer connections to identify occupational pathways and inform students about the breadth of careers within the agricultural sector.[181]

Sidebar 3: Career Connect Washington's continuum of career connection

Career Connect Washington provides career-connected programming for students in K-12 and beyond, organized into three categories:

- **Career Explore**: School- and community-based programs that allow young people to explore career options; these programs tend to be one-time events such as career fairs or skill-building workshops.[182]
- **Career Prep**: Opportunities such as CTE courses, internships, and pre-apprenticeships that provide young people with hands-on professional experiences.[183]
- **Career Launch**: Paid work experiences coupled with classroom education that lead to either an industry-recognized credential or at least 45 postsecondary credits.[184]

Table 5. Career Connect Washington's sector leaders

Sector	Sector Leader
Advanced Manufacturing and Aerospace	Association of Washington Business Institute, in partnership with the Aerospace Futures Alliance
Agriculture and Natural Resources	Agriculture & Natural Resource Center of Excellence
Clean Technology and Energy	CleanTech Alliance, in partnership with Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy
Construction	AGC Education Foundation
Education	Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession
Finance	WBA
Health Care	SEIU Healthcare 1199NW Multi-Employer Training and Education Fund
IT and Cybersecurity	Computing for All
Life Science	Life Science Washington
Maritime	NW Center of Excellence for Marine Manufacturing & Technology

Grant funding catalyzes the development of career-connected programming

Career Connect Washington provides "program builder" grants to a variety of organizations (e.g., employers; educators; job training, skill center, and community-based organizations; and intermediaries)[185] to create and scale career-connected learning programs across the Career Explore, Prep, and Launch continuum. Grants are awarded on a competitive basis and typically range from $100,000 to $175,000. These grants are funded through a combination of one-time federal funds, which are sought by Career Connect Washington agencies, and state Workforce Education Investment Account appropriations.[186]

To date, $26.8 million has been granted to more than 165 organizations to build and scale 183 programs;[187] the state closed round 13 of its request for proposals in October 2024.[188] While the goal of these program builder grants is "to catalyze the development and expansion of programs statewide,"[189] Stegemoeller explained that the state's approach has shifted in the past five years from "letting a thousand flowers bloom to cultivating a well-curated garden, so that we are funding intentional pathways that meet employer need and provide students with relevant experiences that are directly connected to their local workforce."[190] She explained that in the beginning, the state was focused on increasing the number of programs across a variety of industry pathways. Now that there are many

successful programs, Career Connect Washington is "working with industry and regional partners to inform both the growth and alignment of future programs at scale based on employer and regional need. We're trying to be intentional with how and what we are building, as well as ensuring programs meet the needs of students of color and students from rural communities."[191] Career Connect Washington built a statewide directory of its programs to help young people find local opportunities.[192] Students can search by program, occupation, school, and/or location to find career, regional, or interest-aligned matches.

A formalized public-private leadership model will ensure long-term program stability

The most recent evolution of Career Connect Washington came in July 2024, when the initiative shifted from being housed in the governor's office to a formalized, public-private leadership model led by four organizations with distinct roles (Table 6).[193]

Stegemoeller reflected on the impetus for this change: "As the system grew and evolved, it became clear that a long-term, sustainable leadership model was needed. We are so grateful for Gov. Inslee's vision and support, and an initiative that's going to last over time probably can't live in a governor's office."[194] While the transition is still new, the four organizations are working closely to ensure they are operating in lockstep. The leadership team meets weekly, and aims for a full-day, in-person meeting at least once per month to do a deeper dive into "whatever issues need to be covered at the moment, both reactive and proactive," according to Stegemoeller.[195] The group has created a master calendar of decision points that will include a strategic planning process and, as needed, a step-back to reflect on roles and responsibilities.

Table 6. Career Connect Washington's public-private partnership leadership organizations

Organization	Role
Washington Student Achievement Council	Coordinate across state government and report regularly on progress to the Workforce Education Investment Board.
Employment Security Department	Administer the Workforce Education Investment Board-funded Career Connect Washington grant programs established in state law.
Washington Roundtable and Partnership for Learning	Ensure the representation of industry voice in Career Connect Washington leadership (in partnership with the Association for Washington Business and the Washington State Labor Council).
Washington STEM	Support regional networks and sector leaders to align and grow programs and lead work that includes data collection and removing barriers for students.

Federal grant funds and centralized resources support future growth

As Career Connect Washington looks to the future with its new leadership structure, its work is buoyed by more than $30 million in federal grants, including funds from the Good Jobs Challenge and Apprenticeship Building America.[196] These funds will support the expansion of Career Connect Washington programming focused on four priorities: 1) aligning credentials across K-12, higher education, and industry; 2) strengthening employer partnerships; 3) removing barriers to career-connected learning; and 4) prioritizing funding for programs aligned with regional workforce and sector demands.[197]

K-12 students in Washington can look forward to more efficient, centralized access to work-based learning and other career experiences and resources in alignment with postsecondary options. In 2023, the Washington Legislature passed Senate Bill 5243, which requires all high school students to have a High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) that includes an identification of career and educational goals and the coursework and experiences that will help them meet those goals.[198] The law requires the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to facilitate the transition to a universal online platform to house students' HSBPs. Stegemoeller noted the OSPI is working hard on this platform to support students as early as middle school in gaining a "clearer understanding [of career options] so they can pursue career-connected learning opportunities" and other targeted experiences in high school and postsecondary education and/or training.[199] More than 100 HSBP Advisory Council members will be meeting between September 2024 and May 2025 to support the development of this platform.[200]

Washington's economy is growing rapidly. The state anticipates 1.5 million job openings by 2032, 75% of which will require a postsecondary credential.[201] In this context, the Career Connect Washington initiative, and its combination of steady funding and concerted focus on streamlining K-12 connections to postsecondary and the workforce, is more important than ever.

WEST VIRGINIA

Collecting and using data to drive program improvement

Criteria of Focus

- Data collection
- Use of data to drive quality

Key Takeaways

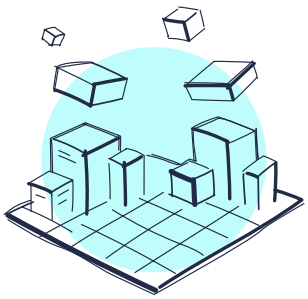
- A customized data system allows state leaders to understand the breadth and scope of work-based learning across West Virginia.
- Tying data to funding incentivizes districts to create high-quality work-based learning opportunities and make them widely available.
- Regular, responsive stakeholder engagement creates a system that works for all users.
- Quality data help tell the story of work-based learning.

Introduction

In March 2020, West Virginia's then-Gov. Jim Justice signed Senate Bill 303, the Students' Right-to-Know Act,[202] which aims to help high school students make more informed decisions about their postsecondary and career options. The bill requires the state Board of Education, the Higher Education Policy Commission, and the Council for Community and Technical College Education to collect and report annually on a variety of data, such as in-demand occupations, the cost of postsecondary options, and the availability of paid internship and externship opportunities, to help high school students weigh "the costs and benefits of post-high school training and education."[203]

This legislation spurred the creation of the Classroom 2 Career (C2C) initiative, which works to give high school students the opportunity "to receive hands-on learning, take a national credentialing exam, and enter the workforce upon graduation."[204] Through C2C, West Virginia students can access career exploration and work-based learning opportunities such as service-learning projects, externships, internships, and apprenticeships.[205]

Since the launch of C2C, work-based learning opportunities have proliferated in districts across the state, spurring state leaders' desire for more and better data on the various opportunities available to students. Given this backdrop, state education leaders have focused on developing the data systems to track, organize, and analyze data on these opportunities and use those data to incentivize program quality.



A customized data system allows state leaders to understand the breadth and scope of work-based learning across West Virginia

Within the West Virginia Education Information System, the state's education data management system, lives the Career Tech WV portal. Today, this portal captures CTE-specific, district-level data on six indicators: rates of participation, concentrators, completers, engagement in work-based learning, student performance on technical assessments, and number of teachers with proper CTE endorsements.[206] Officials at the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) have created a user-friendly interface so stakeholders — including district administrators, teachers, and the public — can easily see progress toward each indicator.

The Career Tech WV portal has not always been this robust and user-friendly, however. The origins of the current system date back to 2016, when WVDE officials partnered with the National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) to develop end-of-program assessments to measure outcomes from the state's Simulated Workplace initiative.[207] Two years later, just as the state had gotten these assessments off the ground, Congress passed Perkins V. That legislation introduced some changes to CTE program accountability and called for greater alignment among schools, higher education institutions, and employers.[208]

The parallel implementation of a new outcomes assessment by NOCTI and the federal Perkins V Act led WVDE officials to consider whether they needed a broader and more capable data and accountability system. "We started thinking," explains Adam Canter, CTE director at WVDE, "why don't we create our own tools and an accountability ecosystem that everybody lives within so we can keep better track of everything we're doing."[209] An early step toward Canter's vision was connecting NOCTI's system to Career Tech WV so that NOCTI could push the assessment results from West Virginia's students directly into the Career Tech WV. This allowed WVDE to capture all its Simulated Workplace data in one place.

Today, the system allows state leaders to create customized, filterable reports at the state, district, and school levels reporting on the total and average number of hours worked, business partners, wages, certificates earned, and more.

When the state launched the C2C initiative in 2020, Canter and his team started to think about how to use the existing system to capture more data, particularly data on work-based learning. With the support of NOCTI, WVDE "infused work-based learning activities into the system" via a "timecard" approach.[210] The timecard allows students to track their hours worked and wages earned on a variety of work-based learning activities. Today, the system allows state leaders to create customized, filterable reports at the state, district, and school levels reporting on the total and average number of hours worked, business partners, wages, certificates earned, and more.[211]

The system's most recent data (from SY23-24) show that more than 13,000 CTE students in the state logged work-based learning activities. Those students collectively worked more than 1 million hours and earned more than $3 million in partnership with over 2,000 business partners.[212] This represents dramatic growth from SY20-21, when 178 CTE students logged approximately 69,000 hours earning just over $489,000.[213]

Tying data to funding incentivizes districts to create high-quality work-based learning opportunities and make them widely available

WVDE officials are now using the enhanced data reporting in Career Tech WV to align funding to program quality. West Virginia school districts receive funding for their CTE programs through three funding streams: federal Perkins V dollars, a state-funded secondary block grant, and a state-funded equipment grant. The secondary block grant formula has evolved over the years as WVDE's data systems have collected more and better data (Table 7). The components of the secondary block grant funding formula are directly aligned to the indicators on the Career Tech WV interface.[214] Canter explains, "CTE funding is driven by the indicators we report on in Career Tech. So districts' performance in this system helps drive their money for coming years."[215] As of 2024, student performance informs the allocation of more than one-fifth of a district's CTE funds, while work-based learning participation informs 10%.

Table 7. West Virginia's secondary block grant funding formula

Category	2021[216]	2024[217]
Hold harmless	10%	5%
Percentage of students enrolled in grades 6-12	25%	10%
Percentage of students completing at least one CTE course	30%	13%
Percentage of students who are concentrators (complete at least two CTE courses within a program of study)	N/A	20%
Percentage of students who complete a state-approved CTE program of study	35%	20%
Percentage of workforce-ready students according to the CTE technical assessment	N/A	22%
Work-based learning*	N/A	10%

**Data collection for this category began in SY23-24.*

Regular, responsive stakeholder engagement creates a system that works for all users

The Career Tech WV timecard system was built hand in hand with students and teachers and continues to evolve based on feedback from users. Through surveys and conversations, WVDE officials regularly solicit feedback from end users and adjust the system to address challenges that surface from that input.

One of the early challenges was identifying the right terms to use to capture the activities schools were offering and students were engaging in. Canter said, “We very quickly realized teachers were calling the same activity 10 different things. … There was a need to help define and put guardrails around the activities so we’re all talking the same language.”[218] So WVDE identified and defined five categories of activities — internships, clinicals, apprenticeships, simulated workplace, and community projects — and aligned the timecard to them.

Other improvements that WVDE has made recently in response to user input include updates to the interface and efforts to allow app and mobile logins to the data systems. WVDE also plans to further streamline the categories of work-based learning activities to facilitate even greater ease of use.

Quality data help tell the story of work-based learning

Effective data collection and dissemination will continue to shape West Virginia’s work-based learning efforts, leveraging the data to strengthen the quality of work-based learning offerings and drive access for all. At the same time, the state is excited about the possibilities of data to help tell its story of work-based learning and build support. As Canter notes, “We really wanted to be able to tell the story. And we felt like, until we build a foundation [of data] to tell the story from, it’s an empty story.”[219] As West Virginia compiles more data purposefully connected to its goals, the opportunities for storytelling and building support and momentum across the state appear promising. “CTE should not be the best-kept secret. It should be the biggest-told story,” Canter remarked, “and there are a million stories happening throughout the state.”[220]

REFERENCES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Note: The state profiles in this report are not an exhaustive analysis of improvements made to work-based learning across the state; rather, they are a subset of activities states have brought to our attention since we finalized the 2021 analysis. Many other efforts to improve work-based learning are underway across the country.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Casalaspi is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area.
He can be reached at david.casalaspi@bellwether.org.

Lynne Graziano is a senior analyst at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area.
She can be reached at lynne.graziano@bellwether.org.

Kelly Robson Foster is a senior associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area.
She can be reached at kelly.foster@bellwether.org.

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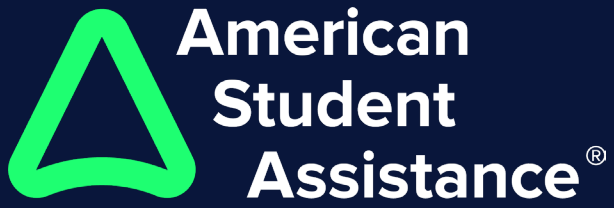

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