

# Expanding High-Quality Work-Based Learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on many facets of students' successful transitions from secondary into postsecondary education, particularly for students who depend on in-person delivery of content and experience. The reliance of experiential learning, or work-based learning, on in-person modalities has put the availability of these critical career-readiness experiences at risk. Opportunities for quality work-based learning were already scarce for students from rural or distressed economies, as well as students from low-income families, opportunity youth (young adults ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and unemployed) and students from historically marginalized communities. Policy solutions that support new models for high-quality work-based learning are necessary to respond to the current moment and can be part of a long-term strategy to scale and ensure equitable access to career experience and preparedness.

Real-world work experiences are more important than ever for students leaving high school and entering an uncertain economy. A [quarter of youths ages 16-24 lost their jobs](#) between February 2020 and May 2020, far eclipsing the growth in the unemployment rate for Americans in any other age group. For many young people, paid work-based learning has historically provided a needed source of income, and its importance has grown as youths and their families have been affected by the unemployment crisis. Moreover, the nature of work itself is changing, and policymakers must ensure that young people have meaningful and equitable access to learning about the world of work.

## EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS THROUGH PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS

This Policy Brief is one of six dedicated to various facets of the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, now complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the populations already underserved in our nation's education system. The series — which builds upon "[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#)" — provides actionable steps and examples for state policymakers to consider as they address the transition from high school to college and the workforce. The other Policy Briefs in the series are:

- "[Boosting FAFSA Completion to Increase Student Success](#)"
- "[Policy Solutions That Foster Competency-Based Learning](#)"
- "[Prioritizing Equity in Dual Enrollment](#)"
- "[Modernizing Math Pathways to Support Student Transitions](#)"
- "[Establishing a State-Level Postsecondary Advising Network](#)"

## Work-Based Learning Continuum:

**CAREER EXPOSURE:** Brings students to workplaces for short periods of time with the goal of gaining introductory information about industries, associated occupations and a variety of postsecondary options aligned with careers of interest. Models for high school students include job shadows, company tours, mentoring, simulations and informational interviews.

**CAREER ENGAGEMENT:** Provides students with extended opportunities to increase their knowledge of an identified field of interest and gain employability skills and some entry-level technical knowledge or skills. Models for high school students include internships, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeship readiness and service learning.

**CAREER EXPERIENCE:** Engages students as paid workers to gain specific skills — in conjunction with related classroom or lab instruction, which may include opportunities to earn college credit — in a particular industry or occupation. Models for high school students include youth apprenticeship.

This Policy Brief explores the structural challenges — both new and old — that prevent high school students from accessing quality work-based learning and transitioning to postsecondary education and on to the workforce. Drawing on evidence-based approaches and lessons from the field, it presents a set of state policy considerations to expand access to work-based learning experiences.

## High-Quality Work-Based Learning Experiences

Work-based learning is the completion of “meaningful job tasks in a workplace that develop readiness for work, knowledge, and skills that support entry or advancement in a particular career field.” Work-based learning supports a continuum of learning and skill-development experiences, from career exposure and career engagement to career experience.

Based on evidence and experience in the field, Jobs for the Future (JFF) has developed a set of principles to benchmark successful work-based learning models and programs for creating opportunities for more students to enter and advance in careers. Effective models of work-based learning should:

- **Support entry and advancement in a career track.**  
*Example:* [Wegmans and Hillside work-scholarship connection program](#)
- **Provide meaningful job tasks that build career skills and knowledge.**  
*Example:* [The 12 for Life](#) program operated by Southwire

- **Offer compensation.**  
*Example:* [This Way Ahead](#) program operated by Gap, Inc
- **Identify target skills and how gains will be validated.**  
*Example:* [Partnership between Orosi High School and Indoor Environmental Services in California](#)
- **Reward skill development.**  
*Example:* [The Wonderful Company's Agriculture Career Prep](#) program
- **Support college entry, persistence and completion.**  
*Example:* [SAP's education initiatives](#) in major cities across North America
- **Provide comprehensive student supports.**  
*Example:* [Taller San Jose Medical Careers Academy](#)

## Structural Challenges to Work-Based Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges, threatening students' ability to successfully transition to postsecondary education and on to the workforce. This section details challenges specifically related to accessing high-quality work-based learning.

### Employer concerns

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When considering whether to offer work-based learning experiences, many employers hold a common concern that labor laws and liability issues will present insurmountable

obstacles to bringing youth into workplaces. These concerns are [generally unfounded](#), but misperceptions remain. Most employers that engage young people in work ultimately find that they need to make [minimal changes](#), if any, to existing workplace policies and procedures. In addition, many employers express reservations about the time and energy it takes them to craft meaningful work-based learning experiences for young people. Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, employers who have been hit hard by the pandemic may struggle even more to prioritize engaging young people in work-based learning, and social distancing may continue to limit access to workplaces.

### Competing priorities for schools

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In many schools and districts, work-based learning opportunities are viewed as an add-on kind of programming for students that isn't essential. This can lead to competition for both resources and attention with other program offerings in schools. This challenge is exacerbated by the pandemic, as schools are in the midst of creating new hybrid models of education for the fall. These schools will be unlikely to view work-based learning experiences as a first focus area and thus work-based learning faces the additional risk of being squeezed out of school budgets.

### Disparities in early work experiences

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Early work experiences can help place youth and young adults on a positive pathway toward upward socioeconomic mobility.

However, studies show that [white youths are employed at significantly higher rates than youths of color](#) ages 16 to 19. Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds often lack access to early work experience and other career development activities. The [evidence demonstrates](#) that this has a negative effect on their long-term career prospects, and that work-based learning is part of the solution to this challenge. Also, students from low-income backgrounds often cannot afford to dedicate time to unpaid work-based learning opportunities. Because early work experiences are critical and the nature of work continues to change as a result of the pandemic and economic crisis, work-based learning opportunities should be intentionally designed to serve students from low-income families and Black, Latinx and Native American students.

## Geographic isolation

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Location and geography can also make it challenging for school districts to provide a diverse range of work-based learning experiences for students. For example, many rural areas and economically distressed communities lack diversity of employers and may be dominated by just one or two industries. This can make it challenging for schools to find employer partners or to present a wide range of work-based learning opportunities that align with student interests. Geographic isolation and lack of transportation options — in rural and urban environments — can also make it difficult for students to travel to work-based learning opportunities. With the impacts of social distancing, the imperative to develop innovative and virtual ways to provide work-based learning experiences for these communities are now relevant to a much broader set of students.

## Lack of infrastructure

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Few states provide dedicated funding or other supports to build and sustain the infrastructure, including intermediary organizations, needed to scale work-based learning and ensure equitable access to these opportunities. Intermediaries can play an important role in bridging the connection between education and industry; and their functions may include working with education and employers to co-develop curricula for work-based learning, placing students in positions, and helping align the needs of both employers and students. Examples of effective intermediaries operating in this space include, [AchieveMpls](#), [INNOVATE Tulare-Kings](#) and [HERE to HERE](#). In the absence of intermediary support, work-based learning opportunities are often created through personal relationships between educators and employers. Under these circumstances, partnerships often evaporate when an individual changes jobs or retires. Moreover, in underfunded schools where teachers often lack the time needed to build relationships with employers, students have access to fewer work-based learning opportunities. The lack of infrastructure also makes it more difficult for industry partners to engage efficiently, exacerbating the challenge of employer engagement.

## Policy Considerations

As state policymakers move from a focus on relief to recovery and rebuilding, they will have the opportunity to consider policies that undertake major system integration and redesign to address both immediate challenges and inequities in existing systems. Policy support is important because the

current moment presents numerous hurdles, and a strong set of policy incentives can overcome these significant challenges. Policymakers can enact policies and support the implementation and expansion of work-based learning experiences that are purposefully inclusive and increase access and success of these opportunities for students from low-income families and those from traditionally low-resourced school districts.

Below are five key levers for policymakers to pursue in order to ensure that students have access to the high-quality work-based learning experiences that will help them transition effectively to college and career.

### **1. Promote the strong partnerships between K-12 systems, postsecondary systems and employers that are foundational for high-quality experiences.**

A statewide initiative for expanding work-based learning experiences can focus on equitable access, success and quality. A statewide initiative can help stakeholders establish a clear definition for work-based learning, goals for closing participation gaps and a strong focus on quality of opportunities. Often, an intermediary organization can be effectively deployed to provide infrastructure for collaboration between school and employer partners.

#### **STATE EXAMPLE**

**Washington's** [Career Connected Learning initiative](#) was launched in 2017 by Gov. Jay Inslee with the goal of connecting 100,000 Washington youths over a five-year period with career-connected learning opportunities that prepare them for high-demand jobs. The initiative helps students gain awareness about jobs and careers, hands-on experiences in a particular field,

and connections to meaningful (and often paid) work experiences aligned with classroom instruction. The state also has a [Career Connect Washington Intermediary Grant](#) program that supports intermediaries in their work bridging connections between industry and education, and helps to scale effective programs.

### **2. Enable innovations to address the need for virtual experiences, while ensuring that the digital divide doesn't limit access to these opportunities.**

States can provide additional funding — and leverage federal funding — to support schools, districts and intermediaries that are implementing innovative, virtual experiences. A number of [tech-based, virtual work-based learning products](#) show promise in helping more students gain knowledge of career paths, get access to industry mentors, participate in virtual field trips, and demonstrate skill-specific proficiency through micro-badging and micro-credentials. However, lack of funding is a significant impediment to providing quality and equitable access to these opportunities.

States and regions can utilize recent federal stimulus relief funds in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, to build and improve state and local broadband infrastructure for remote education — which would serve as a key stepping stone to implementing technology-based solutions for reaching more students and expanding work-based learning opportunities for all learners.

#### **INTERMEDIARY EXAMPLE**

**Illinois** intermediary Education Systems Center, located at the Northern Illinois

University, strengthens connections between education and the workforce by leading key interagency and public-private collaborations, building networks, implementing policy, and spearheading policy and program opportunities across college and career pathways. EdSystems developed a [virtual work-based learning framework](#) for communities to follow during the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework emphasizes that virtual work-based learning opportunities need to focus on the essential elements and outcomes of work-based learning generally, including providing authentic and meaningful job tasks that build career skills, knowledge and quality engagement between students and industry experts. EdSystems also culls a variety of virtual activity examples and resources along the work-based learning continuum.

### **3. Integrate experiences throughout a student's high school pathway, with a particular emphasis on students who would not typically have access to such opportunities.**

An effective way to integrate work-based learning experiences throughout a student's high school pathway is by requiring them for graduation. When implemented well, this can support the development of clear pathways through high school and into postsecondary and career opportunities that embed and contextualize work-based and experiential learning. States can do this by articulating work-based learning as credit toward graduation requirements and/or dual enrollment pathways to a postsecondary credential.

#### **STATE EXAMPLE**

**Virginia** is changing the educational experience of its high school students to emphasize work-based learning

opportunities and place students on meaningful pathways to good careers or additional education. Virginia's [Profile of a Graduate](#) includes a career-planning component that allows students to learn more about employment options and career paths, which can include an internship or other work-based learning experiences. Virginia reduced the number of standardized tests that students must pass to increase flexibility for schools to expand work-based and service-learning programs that promote college, career and civic readiness.

### **4. Create a diverse range of experiences, from micro-internships to more structured pre-apprenticeships and youth apprenticeships.**

States can create a state guide and related resources to support cross-sector regional leaders in designing and developing a broad range of work-based learning experiences that can be integrated at multiple points within students' college and career pathways. Key stakeholders and regional sectors need guidance and support on the various types of work-based learning opportunities that exist, including ways to effectively implement those experiences.

#### **STATE EXAMPLE**

**Tennessee**, for example, developed a [Work-Based Learning Implementation Guide](#) and a [Work-Based Learning Toolbox](#) that are designed to help districts build strong, effective work-based learning programs. Topics within these resources include, but are not limited to, advisory board recruitment, guidelines for working with interns, employer-satisfaction surveys and student-reflection questions. Tennessee provides both funding and



## Lessons From the Field: The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership

Four communities across **Illinois**, **Ohio** and **Wisconsin** that participate in [The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership](#) initiative are focused on building high-quality work-based learning experiences as a central element in their efforts to increase the number of young people successfully transitioning from high school into college and career. The GLCCPP communities are undertaking this work through strong partnerships among practitioners in K-12, postsecondary education, workforce development, industry and local government.

Before the pandemic hit, the GLCCPP communities focused on placement, trying to get youths connected to an in-person work-based learning experience. Now, the communities are facing the cancellation of internships, training and summer jobs. Employer partners are harder to find as employers are focused on retaining their current labor force rather than skilling a new one. And providing students with essential supports is more challenging in a virtual environment, especially when some young people lack access to broadband and technology.

GLCCPP community partners are thinking of new ways to get students the experiences needed to advance in college and career. In one of the GLCCPP communities, the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago, one of the largest industry partnerships is health care. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as learning became virtual and hospitals closed their doors to nonessential workers, school district leaders transitioned from in-person internships to online ones. The GLCCPP is also deploying virtual career exploration opportunities, including panels, networking events and one-on-one conversations with employers. These public resources are reaching a broader base of students and youths in the community and helping to educate them about in-demand career pathways.

capacity-building to support regional stakeholders in implementing high-quality work-based learning. Through competitive [Perkins Reserve Grants](#), the Tennessee Department of Education funds work-based learning embedded in career pathways. In addition, the Tennessee Board of Regents and the Tennessee Department of Education, through their [Tennessee Pathways](#) partnership, support

regional coordinators in implementing high-quality work-based learning and pathways models in all nine of the state's economic development regions.

### **5. Leverage existing structures and funding streams to scale high-quality experiences.**

States can include participation and success in work-based learning as a career readiness measure for accountability under the

Every Student Succeeds Act and Perkins V. The flexibilities provided under ESSA and Perkins V (Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act) allow states to align their state plans and accountability metrics. As a result, states can strategically leverage ESSA and Perkins V to strengthen and expand work-based learning for all students. For example, states can use Title II of ESSA to support administrators and teachers on the development and expansion of high-quality work-based and experiential learning opportunities while simultaneously using Perkins V funds to allow local agencies to create, promote and scale work-based learning opportunities.

### STATE EXAMPLE

In **Delaware**, the state's department of education, department of labor, Delaware Technical Community College, the United Way of Delaware, the Rodel Foundation, and the Delaware Workforce Development Board all work together through the [Delaware Pathways program](#) to pool and leverage funds to provide youth with high-quality work-based learning experiences connected to the state's regional industries. In addition, the state's departments of education and labor have used funding for summer youth employment programming to create additional work-

based learning opportunities for students. The Delaware Department of Education incentivizes pathways models with embedded work-based learning through its 30 [state-model programs of study](#) and has aligned both their [ESSA](#) and [Perkins V](#) state plans to include indicators related to work-based learning in the state's accountability system.

## Final Thoughts

Experiential and work-based learning opportunities serve as a critical component of a student's successful transition from secondary to postsecondary education and the workforce. The pandemic's disruption to in-person and hands-on learning threatens students' access to work-based learning. However, policy solutions exist that support the expansion of high-quality work-based learning that addresses existing inequities and reaches more students, particularly students from rural areas, students of color and opportunity youth. This moment presents opportunities for policymakers to redouble efforts to support work-based learning and put in place policy guidance, resources and infrastructure supports to meet the current moment and support student success in college and careers.





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