

High-Quality Work-Based Learning

State Policy Recommendations to Build Clearer Paths to Postsecondary Success

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April 2021*

Introduction

Neither a traditional college education nor specific occupational training is enough to ensure long-term career success. Today, individuals also need workplace experience before they enter the labor market on their own, to prepare them to navigate the world of work. High-quality work-based learning programs—which include internships, on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships, among others—integrate postsecondary learning and work to help many students achieve strong career outcomes.

These experiences, which can occur on a continuum from career exploration to development, help young people gain the knowledge, skills, and credentials they need to enter and succeed in careers. Work-based learning is beneficial for all young people but can be especially useful for individuals from low-income backgrounds and others who may otherwise not have access to the career exposure, educational opportunities, professional networks, and social capital that often plays a critical role in career success. In addition, integrating learning and work builds a skilled talent pipeline that benefits industry and supports economic growth.

COVID-19 has put the availability of these critical career readiness experiences at risk, especially for youth and young adults in rural and underserved communities that lack an extensive employer base. This is especially true for youth leaving high school (with or without a diploma) and opportunity youth—young people who are disconnected from school and work—who saw higher unemployment this past spring than any other group.

The Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership (GLCCPP) leaders agree that, now more than ever, the increasingly virtual world and the rapidly-changing economy have produced greater need for integrating learning and work, especially for young people. Yet there is also a

greater challenge in ensuring these opportunities are equitable and high quality. Practitioners continue to struggle in securing critical funding to support this work, receiving comprehensive engagement from employers, and reaching disconnected youth populations.

As state policymakers move from a focus on relief to recovery and rebuilding, they will have the opportunity to consider policies that can mitigate these challenges and enhance college and career pathways efforts across the country. GLCCPP leaders ask states to better support youth talent development by aspiring to statewide policy that enables all young people across the state to have access to work-based learning opportunities.

The Importance of Practitioner-Informed Policy

This policy brief provides state-level policy recommendations to ensure the quality and accessibility of work-based learning opportunities across all youth populations. These recommendations are uniquely informed by practitioners from the GLCCPP communities, including leaders working on the ground across education and workforce development who witness policy successes and barriers firsthand.

Across the country, there is consensus that we must better prepare all young people to succeed in today's rapidly changing economy. But there is little agreement on how to do it. The GLCCPP, launched in 2016 by the Joyce Foundation, aimed to meet this need through creating and expanding high-quality college and career pathways to advance equity and economic mobility for the next generation in the Great Lakes region.

GLCCPP supported four communities that each brought a unique approach to this work: The Northwest Suburbs of Chicago, Illinois; Rockford, Illinois; Madison, Wisconsin; and Central Ohio. All four are grounded in a shared commitment to equity, collaboration, and sustainability. They draw upon national best practices and strategies to inform [three quality indicators](#): 1) strong leadership and governance structures; 2) seamless alignment of students' academic and career preparation across high school and college experiences; and 3) systems to provide equitable access to work-based learning that connect youth to the world of work.

Policy Recommendations

Policy support is essential to address the current moment and ensure these opportunities are accessible and high quality for all young people. State policymakers can and must enact policies that support the design, implementation, and scale of work-based learning experiences that are inclusive and increase access and success for all students, specifically students and youth from low-income families and those from low-resourced school districts. The policy recommendations below were informed by practitioners to ensure that youth and young adults have access to the high-quality work-based learning experiences that will help them transition effectively to college and career.

Recommendation 1: Ensure Equity in Access and Success

Equity should be a through line in the design of all work-based learning opportunities. Equity-focused policies help increase access and promote better outcomes across all youth populations, specifically for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth as well as those who are experiencing poverty.

- **Ensure opportunities are compensated.** Financial stability reduces barriers for individuals and evens the playing field. If states want to ensure that all youth are able to participate in career experiences, so they are prepared for the workforce, they need to ensure they are paid. This policy can take many forms, from industry incentives (*see Engage Employers below*) that help ensure employers pay work-based learning participants, to state-implemented youth employment programs that last a full year rather than just the summer. Local partners can braid and blend resources to ensure youth and young adults receive an income while they are working or participating in on-the-job training.
- **Create a diverse range of experiences along the work-based learning continuum, 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 an individual's college and career pathway. This work is not only responsive to employers but meets the unique needs of individuals, broadening participation opportunities to increase the chances of persistence and success. For example, entrepreneurship programs can help youth develop skills in various environments, providing experience they may need to someday start a business.

Regional Example: Madison, Wisconsin

In Madison, Wisconsin, the local chamber of commerce contracts with an employer, UW Health, to serve as the “employer of record” for the chamber-sponsored internship program. This means that the chamber provides payroll and insurance support to UW Health when they host interns, removing liability concerns for the employer while ensuring youth are paid for their time on the job. Ensured compensation opens this opportunity to more youth. State and local leaders should support school districts and intermediaries in replicating this approach and take on the role of employer of record to address this barrier and ensure equitable access to on-the-job experiences.

Recommendation 2: Bridge K-12, Postsecondary Education, And Career

Strong partnerships between K-12 systems, postsecondary education, and employers are foundational for high quality work-based learning experiences. These partnerships and coordination across sectors ensure experiences are of value for youth, both in college and career.

- **Create a cross-agency statewide initiative for expanding work-based learning.** A statewide initiative can help to bring together stakeholders—including education, postsecondary education, workforce, economic development and commerce—to establish a clear definition for work-based learning across the state as well as to support, implement, and scale best practice. This policy support for cross-agency and business collaboration can help to reduce duplication and create more efficient and effective programs that truly serve the needs of the community. These efforts can also be helpful in developing a clear statewide framework for work-based learning, so everyone understands and is working with the same definition. As part of this initiative, states can more effectively leverage existing business engagement bodies, like Perkins Advisory Councils and Business Advisory Councils under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for secondary and postsecondary education. In addition, this initiative can also incentivize combined state planning across related federal programs (such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Higher Education Act, Perkins, and WIOA) to ensure there is collaboration in the designing and scaling of programs, but also consistency across accountability measures.
- **Ensure opportunities are of value to students in the labor market and along their education pathway.** Too often, youth participate in work-based learning and are unable to transfer learned skills to their future endeavors. By creating stronger partnerships between K-12 and postsecondary educators and employers, they can work together to identify competencies and design work-based learning experiences that

develop these in-demand skills and transferable competencies. Employer involvement is crucial to affirm the validity of credentials, hire work-based learning students who have obtained competencies, and support continuation into postsecondary. This creates more alignment across sectors and promotes greater success for young people in the community.

- **Provide resources for career navigation professional development.** To ensure students have the information to make an informed choice about work-based learning opportunities that best fit their needs and career goals, counselors as well as teachers, mentors, and other in-school supports should be better equipped with career knowledge and expertise. States should promote professional development for these positions, to better assist students with career navigation and identify and place them in opportunities that are connected to high-priority occupations and promising postsecondary credentials. States can ensure professional development opportunities are utilized by creating incentive programs to ensure districts and their staff participate in this education.

State Example: Illinois

In 2016, Illinois passed the [Postsecondary Workforce Readiness](#) (PWR) Act which helps increase secondary student college and career preparedness. As part of this legislation, the PWR Act established a voluntary system for school districts to award college and career pathways endorsements (CCPE) on high school diplomas, demonstrating students' completion of instruction and professional learning experiences in a selected career area. To implement these endorsements statewide, state and industry leaders, intermediaries, and other agency partners [developed competencies for in-demand career clusters](#) across the state to ensure students receiving an endorsement actually had the skills necessary to succeed. The competencies as part of the CCPE speak directly to the importance of having a state framework informed by all stakeholders to drive the work forward. Illinois's industry-aligned competencies were developed in partnership across industry and education leaders and informed by local labor market information. Work-based learning experiences are designed with these in-demand skills as outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Engage Employers

Comprehensive employer engagement continues to be a struggle across districts and communities looking to expand youth work-based learning opportunities. Yet this engagement is essential to ensure career experiences for youth are of value and tied to employer needs. Policy is a tool that can be used to ensure more comprehensive support from the business community.

- **Invest in intermediaries.** The time and effort required for high-quality talent development efforts often creates a significant barrier to industry engagement. To support employers large and small, time barriers need to be removed. Intermediaries, such as workforce boards, chambers of commerce, community colleges, and CBOs, can reduce this burden and enable education and training providers to make effective and efficient use of employers' time. States can provide financial support for the integration of learning and work through investment in intermediary organizations that create the infrastructure needed for successful work-based learning.
- **Financial incentives for small and midsize businesses.** Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, small and midsize businesses advocated for increased financial support for youth work-based learning opportunities. Now, as local businesses continue to struggle, the need for financial support is even greater. States should provide financial incentives to employers, especially those in need, to encourage partnerships, inform programming, and offer paid, high-quality work-based learning opportunities. These financial incentives could include tax credits, grants, reimbursements, or subsidies to employers that help defray the cost of wages. In addition to employer incentives, states should also consider creating an incentive that recruits employees from regional, in-demand industries as educators, so students have high-quality teachers that can get them prepared for their career and educational pathway.
- **Create state guidance and support to address perceived liability concerns.** Work-based learning for youth raises employer concerns about liability issues and insurance costs. Liability requirements and expectations vary across states, regions, and even industries. Despite these differences, the challenge is largely a messaging issue that could be addressed with better state guidance on labor laws and participation. As part of this effort, state leaders should have a platform to provide transparency around differing state youth employment laws.
- **Continue to support sector strategies and initiatives.** Sector strategies are crucial to alleviate burdens on employers. By bringing together employers in a specific industry to build career pathways that include career-focused education and a robust continuum of work-based learning, they help support regional talent pipelines. These strategies are already promoted in our nation's [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#), but states can ensure these practices are included in their state plans and provide additional resources to support these efforts if able.

Regional Example: Columbus, Ohio

Columbus State Community College serves as a work-based learning intermediary connecting K-12 education, postsecondary education, and employers for paid work-based learning opportunities in a modern manufacturing pathway. With a goal of addressing the industry demand for qualified manufacturing technicians in the region, Columbus State Community College works with the Honda Motor Company to deliver an interdisciplinary curriculum focused on supply chain management, engineering technology, and information technology coursework with paid work-study opportunities at Honda.

Recommendation 4: Leverage Technology to Better Serve Youth and Employers

Even in an increasingly virtual world, policymakers need to leverage technology to ensure youth continue to have access to work-based learning opportunities. To ensure these opportunities are accessible and high quality, states must think about updating technology systems and enabling innovative practices that have been successful in a COVID-19 economy.

- **Transform state and local technology systems.** Policymakers must ensure work-based learning remains an option and accessible for all youth and young adults, especially those in remote locations, or without access to high-speed internet or connectivity devices like cell phones and tablets. With online learning and work here to stay, state policy must ensure increased and sustained resources to update state and local technology systems to allow for easier, seamless navigation of online platforms. This transformation of technology systems should also operate across all necessary partners, including educational entities and employers.
- **Enable innovations to address the need for virtual experiences.** As technological systems are updated, 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.](#) These virtual innovations can broaden reach to ensure youth from all backgrounds are able to gain knowledge of career paths, get access to industry representatives, participate in virtual programming, and demonstrate skill-specific proficiencies.

Regional Example: Rockford, Illinois

In Rockford, Illinois, the district has been working with Grouptrail, a visual database company, to help the district build a custom online hub for their Career Academies, which provide career and technical education for the district. This hub essentially acts as a repository for all Academy things for Rockford schools and students. It's an online warehouse that holds and catalogs volunteers, sponsors, students, work-based learning opportunities, and more. This platform allows career coaches in the community to go in and find the perfect fit for students based on available opportunities—like an academic matchmaking website. While the matching capabilities are a nice feature, the more important piece for Rockford is that it allows career coaches, career and technical education directors, and faculty to track work-based learning experiences and partnerships to identify gaps and provide more equitable college and career readiness experiences and opportunities for their students.

Call to Action

Work-based learning opportunities serve as a critical component of an individual's preparation for the job market, especially now that neither academic experience nor technical expertise alone offers long-term career security. The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to in-person and hands-on learning threatens students' access to these experiences.

However, state policy can better support the development and expansion of high-quality work-based learning opportunities that address inequities and reach a wider audience: students, youth, and young adults (particularly those from rural areas), students of color, and opportunity youth. This moment presents an opportunity for policymakers to redouble efforts to support work-based learning and put in place policy guidance, resources, and infrastructure to meet the current moment and support individuals' persistence and success along their college and career path.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Joyce Foundation for their generous support for this work.

The JFF team would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to the education, workforce, industry, and local leaders who took the time to work with us over the past year, amid the global pandemic, and provide their valuable insights to the development of this brief:

- Jon Furr, Founder and Executive Director, Education Systems Center (EdSystems), Northern Illinois University
- Emily Rusca, Director of State Policy & Strategy, EdSystems
- Heather Penczak, Policy and Program Manager, EdSystems
- Nancy Awdziejczyk, Executive Director, Northwest Educational Council for Student Success, Illinois
- Lazaro Lopez, Associate Superintendent for Teaching and Learning at High School District 214, Arlington Heights, Illinois
- Reid Jutras, Director of Career and Technical Education, Rockford, Illinois, Public Schools
- Bob Guirl, Chair, Alignment Rockford
- Seth Lentz, CEO, Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin
- Hugh Wing, Community Development Specialist, City of Madison, Wisconsin
- Steve Dackin, Superintendent of School and Community Partnerships, Columbus State Community College, Ohio

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership

Funded by the Joyce Foundation, the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership supports four Great Lakes communities—Central Ohio; the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago; Rockford, Illinois; and Madison, Wisconsin—in building high-quality college and career pathways that equip students to thrive in college, careers, and beyond. The partnership especially focuses on serving historically marginalized students and underrepresented groups. www.glccpp.com