

# High School Work-based Learning:

## Best Practices Designed to Improve Career Readiness Outcomes for Today's Youth

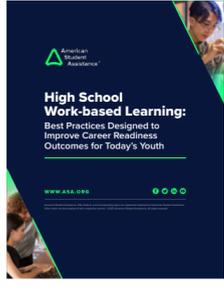
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IN THE UNITED STATES, formal work-based learning opportunities, such as apprenticeships, internships, cooperative education, entrepreneurial experiences, practicums, service learning and project-based learning, have traditionally been reserved for college students and are rarely associated with the high school student. A recent study by our organization, American Student Assistance (ASA) — a national non-profit on a mission to help students make informed choices to achieve their postsecondary education and career goals — found that while 79% of high school students would be interested in a work-based learning experience, only 34% were aware of any opportunities for students their age<sup>1</sup> — and just 2% of students had completed an internship during high school.<sup>2</sup>

Working together with educators, employers, youth-serving organizations, state and federal policymakers and more, ASA's goal is to increase the number of states committed to ensuring all youth younger than 18 have equitable access to robust, high-quality work-based learning programs, with policies in place to support program funding, infrastructure, quality and accountability.

In 2021, ASA, in conjunction with Bellwether Education Partners, released *Working to Learn and Learning to Work: A State-by-State Analysis of High School Work-based Learning Policies*. The audit revealed that states have taken a wide range of approaches to implementing work-based learning for high school-aged youth. Federal legislation, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), encourages and incentivizes states to implement work-based learning policies and programs at the secondary level, but still allows for considerable discretion in states' work-based learning programs. As a result, program access and quality vary greatly from state to state.



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This guide, "*High School Work-based Learning: Best Practices Designed to Improve Career Readiness Outcomes for Today's Youth*," aims to take a deeper dive on *Working to Learn's* recommendations, compiling best practices and interviews with state leaders pioneering new strategies in youth work-based learning.<sup>3</sup>

We hope this informative resource provides state education leaders, educators, employers, community-based organizations and other stakeholders with the information and insight they need to expand program access and enhance program quality in their own regions.

### 6 BENEFITS OF WORK-BASED LEARNING FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS

Research suggests that opening work-based learning to younger students brings tremendous benefit not only to the students, but also to employers, communities and society at large. Work-based learning while in high school benefits students and employers in the following ways:

1. Connects classroom learning to the real world and has positive impacts on student engagement and retention.
2. Gives students the chance to earn industry credentials before graduation.
3. Builds the technical and interpersonal skills needed to succeed in the workplace.
4. Carves a pathway into the labor market.<sup>4</sup>
5. Gives students invaluable opportunity to explore and experiment with potential careers before investing thousands of dollars or hours in education and training, so they can better craft a deliberate postsecondary plan based on passions and ultimate career goals.
6. Allows businesses and organizations to benefit by cultivating a pipeline of talent with new perspectives, while the local community can realize reduced unemployment and attract new business and industry. Indeed, many other industrialized nations regularly use youth work-based learning to develop future workforces and embed employability skills in teenagers.

# 9 Best Practices Designed to Improve Career Readiness Outcomes for Today's Youth

## 1. Ensure Broad Eligibility and Widespread Equitable Access

38/50 STATES

have broad eligibility for which students can participate in work-based learning

WHILE MOST STATES do not impose strict restrictions on which students can participate in work-based learning opportunities, some do set eligibility requirements that limit the number and type of students who can participate. **Most states — 38 — have broad eligibility for which students can participate in work-based learning.** A handful of states impose no restrictions from the state level, but allow local districts to define eligibility, creating differences in opportunity across districts and potentially confusing variability from district to district. Some states set age (typically 16+) or grade (typically 11th or 12th) requirements to ensure compliance with state labor laws. Other states, such as Ohio, Connecticut, and Delaware, have changed labor or insurance regulations at the state level to make work-based learning for younger students more possible, and to reduce barriers to employer participation.

## 3. Address Common Barriers

MORE THAN HALF of states provide stakeholders with a centralized work-based learning resource or manual that contains information and guidance about relevant laws and policies. Fewer states have taken active steps to address known barriers, such as safety, liability, child labor laws, or workers' compensation. Often, states fail to identify barriers because they are not collecting enough data on their work-based learning programs. This can make it difficult to identify trends in work-based learning participation and understand how those trends might be driven by existing laws and policies that act as barriers to certain communities, districts, student groups, or employers. However, some states such as New Jersey and South Carolina, are actively working to identify obstacles and provide solutions.

More than 50%

of states provide stakeholders with a centralized work-based learning resource or manual that contains information and guidance about relevant laws and policies.

## 4. Provide Financial Incentives to Encourage Employer Participation

JUST OVER HALF of all states offer financial incentives like tax credits to offset high school work-based learning costs on the employer side and encourage businesses to partner with schools to offer work-based learning opportunities. However, these programs are often limited to employers offering certain types of work-based learning (most commonly apprenticeships), rather than being available to employers participating in all types of work-based learning. A few states, including Delaware, New Jersey, and Vermont, have programs that include a broader set of work-based learning experiences.

## 2. Support Access for Underserved Students

CREATING BROAD ELIGIBILITY and ensuring universal access to work-based learning opportunities is critical. However, states must also develop structures to target high-need students and ensure their success in a work-based learning experience. Very few states have developed explicit policies or programs to ensure access and success for underserved students.

Just 19 States

have developed policies or programs above and beyond the minimum federal requirements to ensure access for high-need student groups

Less than half of U.S. states — just 19 — have developed policies or programs above and beyond the minimum federal requirements that are designed with the specific goal of ensuring high-need student groups can access and succeed in work-based learning opportunities. Those states that do, such as Georgia, Rhode Island, and Illinois, take a variety of approaches to supporting underserved student groups, ranging from creating separate work-based learning programs for certain student groups (e.g., students with disabilities), to requiring that districts include in their applications to operate a work-based learning program details about the program's plan to support underserved students, to providing additional funding to ensure students have the materials they need to be successful in work-based learning.

Just over half of all states offer financial incentives to offset high school work-based learning costs and encourage businesses to partner with schools to offer work-based learning opportunities.

## 5. Dedicate Federal and State Funding

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT provides dedicated funding for work-based learning at both the secondary and postsecondary level through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (reauthorized as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, or Perkins V) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Under Perkins, states receive block grants of funding that can be allocated to financially support all facets of career and technical education (CTE) programs of study and career pathways programs, including costs associated with work-based learning.

About half of all states also use grant funds or other time-bound sources of funding for work-based learning. While these programs can provide an important infusion of cash to support schools, districts, or other organizations to launch work-based learning programs, these funds are not a consistent source of support, meaning that districts and organizations may have difficulty sustaining work-based learning programs beyond the duration of the grant period. A smaller handful of five states, including Washington, Rhode Island, and South Carolina, have taken the additional step of inserting a line item in the state budget or creating dedicated funding streams solely or primarily focused on creating and expanding work-based learning opportunities.

## 6. Strengthen Statewide Infrastructure and Communications

WORK-BASED LEARNING infrastructure remains in the early stages in most states. Many states have adopted a "work-based learning coordinator" model and tasked those coordinators with communicating among stakeholders about work-based learning programs and opportunities. This approach to communications, though, relies heavily on the capacity and networks of a single person, rather than leveraging the collective capacity and networks of stakeholders statewide. Several states, such as Nevada, North Carolina, and Rhode Island, also have built websites to help match young people with work-based learning opportunities.

## 7. Set Clear Quality and Accountability Expectations

ALTHOUGH MANY WORK-BASED learning programs are developed and implemented at the local level, states have an important role to play in setting quality expectations and holding schools and employers accountable. States are at varying places in their development of quality expectations. Many states, including Iowa, Georgia, New York, and Pennsylvania, offer lists of roles and responsibilities for various parties, including the teacher or work-based learning coordinator, the employer partner, and the student, that can provide a framework for program design and establish expectations.



Just 20 states collect comprehensive data on work-based learning, including student outcomes.

## 8. Use Data to Drive Equity and Quality

COLLECTING DATA ON work-based learning experiences is key to spotting trends, highlighting promising practices, and identifying and addressing gaps. The vast majority of states collect and disaggregate data on CTE programming to meet the data reporting expectations outlined in Perkins V. These data often include work-based learning opportunities, especially in states where work-based learning courses have unique course codes that enable states to collect participation data and disaggregate it by student demographics. However, many states offer work-based learning opportunities outside of CTE programming that are not measured in this CTE data reporting, meaning that CTE-based work-based learning data tell just a portion of the story. **Just 20 states, including Virginia, Tennessee, Iowa, and Maryland, collect comprehensive data on work-based learning participation, including student outcomes.**

## 9. Applying Multiple Work-based Learning Best Practices

THE STATE OF WASHINGTON is a leader when it comes to many of the best practices laid out in this playbook. In a relatively short period of time, Washington has established dedicated state funding and a policy framework, strong infrastructure, and clear quality and accountability expectations for its work-based learning programs.

A Career Connect Washington (CCW) Task Force was formed to perform a year of strategy work in 2018, meeting with key stakeholder groups, conducting focus groups with parents and students, and presenting at conferences and meetings around the state. The Task Force's learnings were then the basis of Washington's plan for the vision, framework and strategic approach to implementing career connected learning statewide. Career Launch work-based experiences are meaningful, paid, connect to a real job, and also give the student either an industry credential or at least a year's worth of college credit. **Washington has the ambitious goal of ensuring that 60 percent of the class of 2030 will participate in a Career Launch program.**



Washington's goal: 60% of class of 2030 to participate in a Career Launch program.

1 Johnson, K. "High School Internships: A Field Overview." American Student Assistance research, July 2020.  
 2 "Spotlight on High School Internships." American Student Assistance, 2020. <https://www.asa.org/research-study/spotlight-on-high-school-internships/>  
 3 Some descriptions of best practice state examples are based on the initial state-by-state research conducted in 2020 for the Working to Learn report. Updates on state processes or progress made on work-based learning initiatives since that time can be reported to ASA at [advocacy@asa.org](mailto:advocacy@asa.org), for inclusion in future reports.  
 4 Martha Ross, Richard Kazis, Nicole Bateman, and Laura Stetler. "Work-Based Learning Can Advance Equity and Opportunity for America's Young People." Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, 2020. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120\\_BrookingsMetro\\_Work-based-Learning\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120_BrookingsMetro_Work-based-Learning_Final_Report.pdf)