

Spotlight on High School Internships

Policy Recommendations

1 Establish guidelines for providing academic credit in high school for internship work experience and change graduation requirements where necessary.

Despite being a valuable learning experience that may better inform higher education choices, most high school students haven't experienced an internship. Often, this is due to the limited availability of high school credit for work-based learning, or the challenge in navigating the process to take advantage of credit opportunities. If a student must divide his/her time between classes required for graduation, a job that provides needed income, or an internship that provides neither a wage nor credit, **it's easy to see how the internship may not be viewed as a priority.** States, therefore, should look to change high school graduation requirements to allow for internships to count toward high school credit, and ensure that all students know these opportunities exist. There are some states that have already moved in this direction.

For example, the [Career Development Incentive Program in Colorado](#) established a framework for individual school districts to help high school students identify work-based learning opportunities and establish the criteria by which these programs will meet the necessary requirements to receive high school credit. Similarly, [Michigan](#) enacted a law directing all local school boards to grant high school credit to a student in grades 9 to 12 for the completion of an internship or work experience, if the student attends the internship or work experience at least four hours per week for the same number of weeks as are necessary to earn credit in a traditional course. The law also outlines the specific criteria needed to ensure program success. Establishing the regulatory infrastructure to expand internships for high school credit is a necessary first step to ensure these valuable work-based learning opportunities are accessible to more students and valued by educators and industry alike. However, once the infrastructure

is in place, school districts then need to ensure these opportunities are widely communicated, equitable to all students, and the means of accessing them are not overly burdensome.

2 Create dedicated funding streams or financial incentives for employers to expand paid internship opportunities to younger students.

Even if students know about internship opportunities and can obtain credit for them, too often, high school students today cannot participate in an internship simply because they can't afford to. Especially under the economic strain of COVID-19, **many more students may have to contribute financially to the family**, seeking any job that offers a paycheck, rather than one that aligns with possible career interests or offers an opportunity to build specific skills. Research has shown that students are not only having to work to earn pay during the pandemic, but that in some cases they are even stopping out of school to do so: daily student absence rates nearly **doubled** from before the pandemic to fall 2020 in both remote and in-person learning settings, and often students were working instead of attending class. We need kids learning through work—not working instead of learning. All students deserve an opportunity to attend school and participate in well-funded work-based learning, so they can explore careers they may want to pursue someday and simultaneously earn much needed wages.

Of course, for student interns to be paid, internships need to be **robustly and dependably**

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funded by public or private dollars. Some employers can afford to pay interns, but many others need additional funding from government, schools, nonprofits, foundations, or philanthropic entities to do so. Two possible sources of federal funding for internship programs, available to schools and districts, are the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. States, meanwhile, most commonly provide financial support through grant programs or tax credits for employers.

In Nebraska, the [Intern Nebraska Grant Program \(InternNE\)](#) reimburses up to 50 percent of an intern's wages, up to \$5,000 per internship. Other states incentivize qualified businesses in certain industries as dictated by state or local workforce needs. For example, [Massachusetts](#) provides reimbursement to employers to incent hiring interns in specific industries like cybersecurity, digital health, and robotics. Massachusetts also has a statewide program called Connecting Activities that aims to link students to a wide variety of work-based learning experiences. These are paid opportunities that require an employer to match or exceed the investment made by the state each year. While many state sponsored programs are targeted toward internships that employ college-aged students, the incentives should be structured to encourage expansion to high schoolers.

3 Establish statewide internship coordination systems.

Often schools and employers fail to start internship programs because they believe the system is too cumbersome to navigate and too time consuming to execute. In addition, students have a hard time finding available opportunities. An ASA nationwide survey of high school students found that overall nearly 80 percent expressed interest in obtaining an internship, but only 34 percent reported hearing about available internships. A centralized statewide intermediary, like that established in Rhode Island through [Skills for Rhode Island's Future](#) or in Delaware through [Delaware Pathways](#) can help connect students, employers, schools, community-based organizations, youth centers and support services to

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appropriate opportunities.

Intermediaries can help employers with many of the time-consuming administrative burdens of running an internship program, such as developing job descriptions, screening applicants, hosting an intern bootcamp orientation, supporting intern

supervisors, and handling payroll and liability logistics. An intermediary can be one entity or a partnership between several entities, including nonprofits, two- and/or four-year institutions of higher education, local workforce boards, industry associations or councils, labor unions, for-profit organizations, local government, or local or regional economic development organizations. Intermediaries can facilitate programs focused solely on high school internships, such as Skills for Rhode Island's Future's [PrepareRI](#) program (sponsored in part by ASA), or those that encompass other forms of work-based learning like [apprenticeships](#). States should support such networks and provide the funding necessary to ensure that they can thrive.

4 Encourage greater private sector investment.

Public-private partnerships that have been used to increase investment in internships at the collegiate level can be expanded to serve younger students. In Virginia, lawmakers have created an [Innovative Internship Fund](#) that would award competitive grants to public institutions of higher education that partner with at least one private sector entity. The entity must agree to provide matching funds to create internship programs for students enrolled at the



institution, with the aim of furthering the state’s workforce goals. Similarly, foundations and for-profit companies should be encouraged to fund internships in high-need sectors. Through its [Internship Challenge](#), the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center (an economic development and investment agency) enables small companies engaged in life sciences throughout the Commonwealth to hire 500 college students and recent graduates as interns annually by connecting employers with prospective candidates and reimbursing intern stipends.

5 Remove barriers to virtual experiences.

In 2020, COVID-19 disrupted many planned internships and work-based learning experiences. In fact, [half of all internship openings were cut](#) as a result of the pandemic. But despite the budget woes and restraints on in-person work during the pandemic, **local governments, employers and nonprofits still found ways to offer youth work-based learning opportunities in a virtual setting** and learned some valuable lessons. In Rhode Island, the intermediary Skills for Rhode Island’s Future transitioned its PrepareRI high school summer internship program to an all-virtual experience that tasked students with forming their own student-run corporations to develop practical solutions to

real-world challenges presented by the pandemic. John Hancock transformed its MLK Scholars Summer program into a high-quality experience to connect teens with work-based mentors. And employers and non-profits throughout the country who were able to transform their work-based learning model and keep a program going found that there were many positive outcomes to a virtual model that should be continued even after employers return

to the workplace. For example, Prepare RI found that while mentoring didn’t work as effectively with a virtual internship, training and project planning were much more effective in this setting.

Virtual internships can pose a challenge for employers and students alike, but they can also open a whole new world of opportunity. Particularly for high school students who lack reliable transportation to an internship location or who are restricted by family members’ schedules because they rely on them for transportation, a remote internship can offer students access from anywhere and a flexible work schedule. Long after the pandemic subsides, this new modality for delivering valuable work-based learning should continue to break down barriers and ensure broader access for students nationwide.

As policymakers work toward implementing virtual internships in their own regions, they should first remove any restrictions or laws that require work-based learning in state or federally funded programs to be in-person. Next, all students must have access to technology. Many states and local municipalities are working toward ensuring all students have access to technology for remote schoolwork, but we must ensure this includes remote work-based learning opportunities as well. Federal lawmakers can help support these efforts by supporting the [E-Rate initiative](#) that would provide reliable home internet service to millions of students, and by passing [COVID relief legislation](#) with designated funding for education and workforce priorities.

States can also sponsor creative solutions that provide high-quality work experiences for students. For example, the PrepareRI program outlined above is sponsored by the Rhode Island Governor’s Workforce Board and American Student Assistance. Rhode Island was able to take an existing program and reimagine it to work in a virtual way. Other states may take this opportunity to lean into a work-based learning experience and create something that did not previously exist or streamline existing programs to make them more effective and efficient. Now is the time to rethink how we link classroom experience to the working world to ensure kids can both stay engaged with their learning and gain valuable workplace skills for future success. **States should do all they can to embrace workplace learning—both digitally and in-person.**

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