



# From Classroom to Career: Federal and State Policy Recommendations for Quality Work-Based Learning

## AT A GLANCE

This policy blueprint offers recommendations for federal and state policy and practice rooted in JFF's Work-Based Learning Framework to build stronger work-based learning systems that support learners at every stage of life.

## AUTHORS

**Krysti Specht**  
Senior Director

**Taylor Maag**  
Director

**Vanessa Bennett**  
Director

# Contents

Executive Summary ..... 3

Introduction ..... 6

Policy Recommendations ..... 10

Policy in Action ..... 26

Conclusion ..... 32

## About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

**JFF’s Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning** bridges systems and practices to scale inclusive and high-quality work-based learning and apprenticeship models that serve all industries and all workers and learners. The Center works with stakeholders at every level, including employers, intermediaries, workforce boards, state and federal agencies, education providers, and community-based organizations, to co-design, implement, and improve apprenticeship and work-based learning programs and increase access to high-quality career pathways.

**JFF’s Policy & Advocacy team** leads the national conversation on economic advancement by shaping state and federal policy discussions and designing bold, field-tested solutions. The team champions practice-informed, nonpartisan approaches to strengthening education and workforce systems, working effectively across the aisle to drive meaningful change. Through forums and institutes, subject-matter expertise, educational advocacy, and design and implementation support, the team provides expert guidance to policymakers and other stakeholders at the state and federal levels.

# Executive Summary

Despite strong bipartisan interest and investment in work-based learning (WBL), it has yet to reach its full potential as a workforce strategy in the United States. The need is clear: Employers cannot fill critical roles; learners face unclear pathways; and traditional, linear education experiences are losing traction. And while WBL can help to effectively address these challenges, it is too often misunderstood and underutilized not only by learners and workers but also by employers and education providers. As the education and workforce systems continue to change, WBL can offer a more robust, strategic, and effective learner and worker experience while simultaneously addressing pressing labor demands across industries and sectors.

This policy blueprint is grounded in Jobs for the Future's (JFF's) 2025 [Work-Based Learning Framework](#), which maps WBL across four key stages: career awareness, exploration, preparation, and experience.<sup>1</sup> The framework recognizes that today's workers and learners can move fluidly within education and work throughout their lives, and that work and learning are no longer expected to follow a single, linear track. It also outlines six quality indicators that define what high-quality programming looks like in practice: universal access, intentional alignment, financial support, personalized mentorship, pathway integration, and collaborative partnership. JFF's vision for high-quality work-based learning aligns with its [No Dead Ends policy agenda](#) and [Big Blur Policy Framework](#). Both call for dissolving the artificial boundaries








between high school, college, and career so that every young person can build and gain the credentials and work experiences they need for success, earlier in and throughout their academic journeys. Embedded, high-quality WBL is the mechanism that makes the Big Blur vision real. However, JFF sees WBL not only as an essential strategy for youth and young adults but also as a vital opportunity enhancer for people at any age or experience level. This is because WBL can be just as agile as the needs of the labor market when it is designed and implemented intentionally.

This policy blueprint starts with an explanation of why a shared vision and language for WBL are essential to developing effective policy, along with an introduction to JFF's Work-Based Learning Framework. Next, we present concrete policy recommendations for state and federal leaders, followed by detailed descriptions of successful WBL programs in Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, Montana, and Minnesota. And finally, we outline key implementation considerations and conclude with a call for policymakers to use WBL as a central strategy for driving economic mobility, meeting talent needs, and building a more inclusive economy.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- State and federal WBL policies are misaligned, resulting in disconnected programming, underutilized resources, and funding gaps. Greater cross-system coordination and more stable funding are essential to scale and sustain WBL.
- Significant variance in how WBL programs are funded, defined, designed, and evaluated creates flexibility but also hinders participation, scale, and sustainability.
- Employer participation, especially in models that are less structured and not as well funded compared with others, remains a critical barrier. Many employers, particularly small and micro businesses, struggle to see the return on investment and lack the capacity to fully engage.
- Intermediaries are essential convenors, funding facilitators, and capacity builders for WBL, yet they remain chronically underfunded and underutilized.
- The WBL landscape is difficult to navigate, and limited career guidance reduces awareness and access. Financial constraints and barriers like unmet transportation, housing, and child care needs further limit participation.

The following elements are needed to effectively align the workforce and education systems, meaningfully engage all critical stakeholders, expand access and opportunities for participation, and support not only scaling but long-term sustainability.

	<b>Stronger alignment between the workforce and education stakeholders, with shared definitions to drive quality and consistency</b>
	<b>Greater and more accessible funding to drive scale and sustainability</b>
	<b>Intentional and structured career guidance and wraparound supports, to increase program access for more workers and learners</b>
	<b>Healthier, more robust data infrastructure and capacity, to modernize WBL, ensure accountability is tracked and systemized, and unlock resources</b>
	<b>Pilots and tests of new models, approaches, and funding strategies, to help state and federal policymakers identify new ways to scale and sustain WBL</b>



# Introduction

The U.S. labor market is at a critical juncture. Even as unemployment remains low, employers in key sectors are struggling to fill critical roles. Meanwhile, too many learners and workers are experiencing unclear career pathways, especially those entering the workforce, seeking to change careers, or hoping to learn new skills to advance in today's economy. *Work-based learning* is the overarching term used to refer to activities that connect work and learning, such as internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, and other types of immersive experiences. Without opportunities to build professional networks and gain hands-on experience via WBL opportunities, the gap between employer needs and jobseekers will persist.



## Work-based learning

---

The overarching term used to refer to activities that connect work and learning, such as internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, and other types of immersive experiences.

Over the past decade, federal and state leaders have taken important steps to expand work-based learning, backed by bipartisan support and new investments. But many of these efforts remain fragmented across systems, programs, and funding streams, making it difficult to scale high-quality opportunities and ensure that learners and workers can access them. When policy agendas treat WBL not as a series of isolated initiatives but as a core strategy for education and workforce systems to meet the needs of both employers and jobseekers, they can remove barriers to participation, support scale, and promote sustainability.

To date, 45 states have established individualized policies to define and support work-based learning, reflecting strong bipartisan recognition of WBL as a critical strategy for education-to-career alignment and workforce development.<sup>2</sup> These policies serve a broad range of worker and learner populations, from middle school students exploring potential career pathways to postsecondary learners, adult workers, and individuals seeking retraining or additional education and training. States use a diverse mix



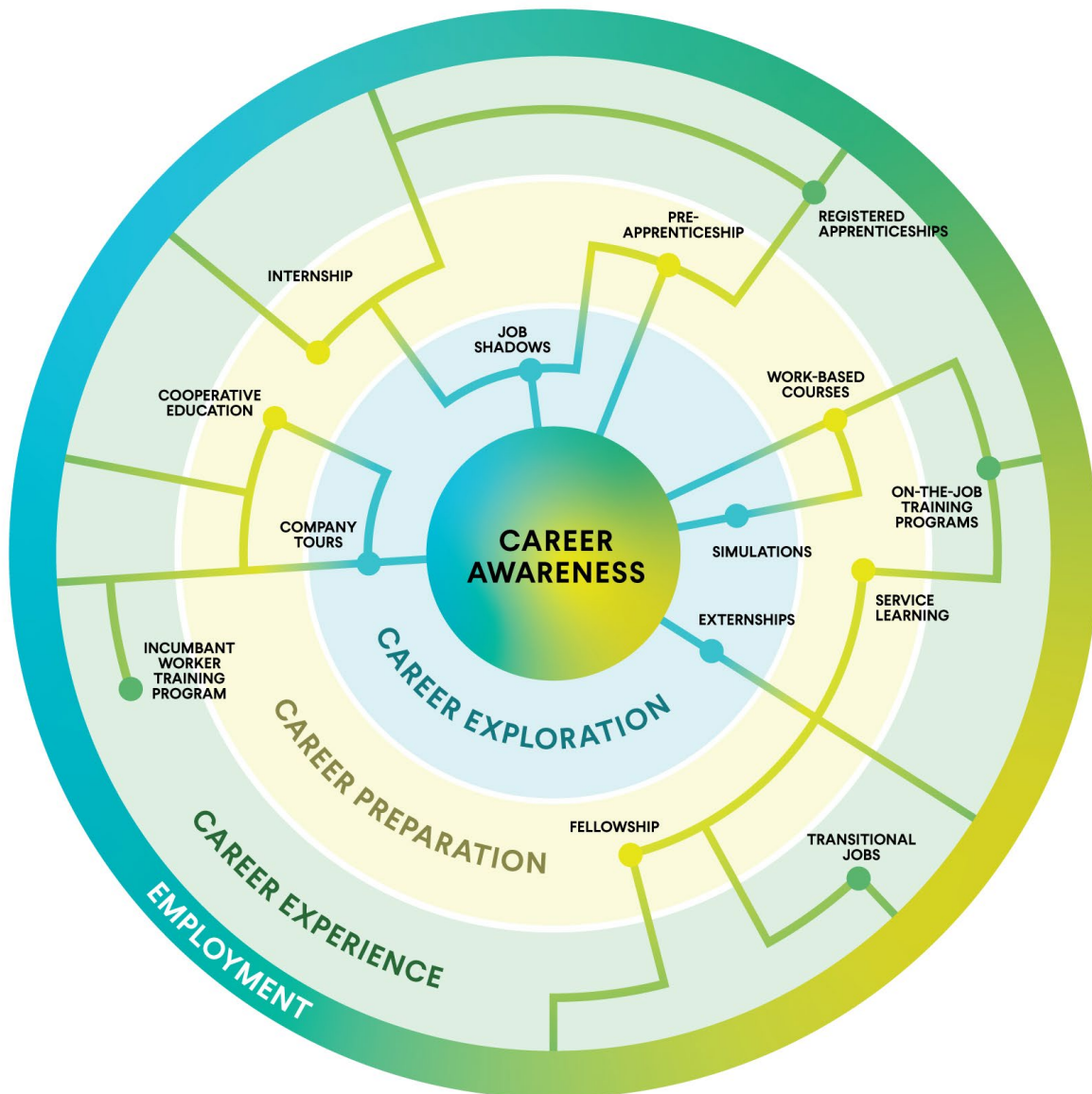
of funding streams, including but not limited to the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V); U.S. Department of Labor workforce funds; the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; and other federal, state, corporate, and philanthropic investments that allow practitioners to design and deliver WBL programs that respond to local labor-market needs.

While state-driven innovations yield valuable experimentation and respond well to regional contexts, they also contribute to a highly fragmented landscape. And while work-based learning has, in practice, existed for centuries, it must evolve as the labor market shifts. The federal government does not have a universal standard definition for WBL, and state-specific eligibility criteria, program

models, and reporting requirements differ, thus creating significant challenges for scaling high-quality WBL, tracking participant pathways and outcomes, and ensuring access for all. The blending of multiple funding sources, though necessary, often leads to administrative complexity and limited transparency, hindering efforts to align accountability systems and assess return on investment.

In 2025, JFF reengineered its Work-Based Learning Framework to reflect the reality behind the learner and stakeholder journeys. It was developed with the current labor market in mind: In today's economy, people rarely follow a linear path through education and career. Learners and workers experience stops and starts, and a learner or worker can engage in WBL at many points along their career journeys.

# The Work-Based Learning Journey



The work-based learning journey toward employment is not always linear. It begins with Career Awareness as the foundation, and can continue through three additional stages: Career Exploration, Career Preparation, and Career Experience. Individuals may move through these stages in sequence or transition in and out over time—reflecting a flexible model that supports lifelong learning and evolving career goals. Along the way, learners engage in a range of activities—such as company tours, job shadowing, and on-the-job training—that help them build skills and gain real-world work experience.

While every education-to-career pathway is unique, JFF emphasizes that quality should be at the core of each opportunity. Quality programming directly affects how individuals respond to a specific career or sector and whether they see themselves in a particular field. JFF's Work-Based Learning Framework defines the stages of WBL and outlines six clear quality indicators for effective practice. When used intentionally, the indicators can help strengthen WBL programming, increase both employers' and learners' connections to WBL and their positive experiences with it, and promote long-term success for all stakeholders.

- ▶ **Universal access:** Proactive outreach and recruitment that intentionally includes underrepresented populations
- ▶ **Personalized mentorship:** Dedicated mentors from industry who provide guidance on technical skills, workplace norms, and career navigation
- ▶ **Intentional alignment:** Age-appropriate, skills-building work experiences that align with participants' interests, abilities, and career goals
- ▶ **Pathway integration:** Clear career pathways that connect work-based learning to education, credentials, and degrees
- ▶ **Financial support:** Compensation and incentives that reflect the duration and intensity of the experience
- ▶ **Collaborative partnership:** Strong collaboration among employers, education providers, workforce systems, and intermediaries

This policy blueprint builds on JFF's 2024 [\*Policy Blueprint to Modernize and Expand Apprenticeship Nationwide\*](#) and 2025 [\*Work-Based Learning Framework\*](#). Drawing on these resources and on emerging lessons from the field, this policy blueprint offers a practical road map for policymakers to modernize WBL systems, expand access to high-quality experiences, and ensure that there are no dead ends for learners and workers as they move from classroom to career.

## Policy Recommendations

Work-based learning is not a niche strategy. It is core workforce infrastructure. Yet, without greater attention from policymakers at all levels, we risk limiting its national scale, its portability, and sustained employer participation. The recommendations below are geared toward policymakers at the state and federal levels but can also be adopted by workforce and education providers and practitioners. They are designed to support greater alignment between WBL systems and stakeholders, drive quality in program design and implementation, promote sustainability and scale, and increase access for more workers and learners.

<b>1</b>	<b>Align public and private partners.</b> Establish shared WBL definitions and quality standards across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems; reduce cross-agency fragmentation; and fund regional intermediaries that lower the cost of employer participation—especially for small and midsize businesses.
<b>2</b>	<b>Enhance and better capitalize on public investments.</b> Increase WBL funding through Perkins V, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), apprenticeship programs, and other relevant federal programs; create employer tax credits and financial incentives; and braid existing streams to reduce administrative silos.
<b>3</b>	<b>Strengthen career guidance and basic supports.</b> Equip counselors and case managers with current WBL knowledge; begin structured career exploration in middle school; and fund transportation, child care, and stipends so program access is not limited by an individual’s economic circumstances.
<b>4</b>	<b>Improve accountability, data quality, and transparency.</b> Modernize longitudinal data systems linking education and employment; align outcome measures across programs; and publish clear public dashboards to drive informed decisions by learners, employers, and policymakers.
<b>5</b>	<b>Pilot innovative delivery models.</b> Fund competitive grants to test emerging work-based learning strategies—including virtual, hybrid, and technology-enabled models—that extend WBL’s reach to rural communities and underserved populations.

Adopting the practices outlined in these recommendations can help state and federal policymakers transform WBL and build learn-and-work ecosystems without walls—where every person, regardless of geography, background, or career stage, can navigate and move seamlessly from classroom to career.

## Align Public and Private Partners



## Recommendation 1: Align Public and Private Partners

WBL requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Education systems (K-12 and postsecondary), workforce development agencies, economic development entities, community-based organizations, and, most critically, employers must work together to design and deliver programs that help learners build job-relevant skills and transition successfully into careers. When these partners operate in silos, programs remain small and difficult for employers to navigate; when they are aligned, WBL becomes a scalable talent-development strategy. Just as stakeholders and systems must align, so too must the definitions we use for WBL. While most states now have formal definitions of WBL, definitions, eligibility rules, reporting requirements, and governance structures vary across state lines.<sup>3</sup> This creates confusion for employers, limits the portability of experiences for learners, complicates outcome tracking, and hinders program scalability across regions and industries. Public policy must therefore focus not only on expanding programs but on better coordinating the public and private partners required to sustain them.

Align Public and Private Partners

► **Establish shared definitions and quality expectations.**

Clear definitions create the foundation for partnership and accountability. And while many states have defined WBL activities, the federal government does not have a unified WBL definition. What’s more, far fewer states have defined what *high-quality* WBL entails or established clear expectations for outcomes and service delivery. This leads to local programs and employers interpreting requirements differently and makes it difficult to evaluate WBL’s impact. JFF recommends that each set of policymakers take specific actions.

Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a shared definition of work-based learning across major federal programs, including Perkins V, WIOA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Higher Education Act (HEA), and other relevant federal legislation.</li> <li>• Ensure that the definition promotes a structured, rigorous experience in which individuals engage in sustained, meaningful interactions with industry or community professionals in real workplace settings or high-quality simulated environments. A shared definition would provide a baseline standard while allowing for state flexibility and innovation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set a work-based learning goal that drives the state’s desired outcomes. For example, a state could adopt the goal that 60% of 16-to-24-year-olds will be participating in high-quality WBL experiences by 2036. That vision could then drive policy actions forward. Such efforts should be led by state governors but include relevant agency leaders to inform statewide goals.</li> <li>• Develop a statewide WBL framework or implementation guide that provides regions with resources on how to build effective programs. Ideally, this would extend beyond career and technical education (CTE) and encompass and align with the state’s education and workforce systems.</li> </ul>

Align Public and Private Partners

► **Improve alignment across public systems.**

The programs that support WBL efforts are often administered separately, even when supporting similar goals. Education, workforce, and economic development programs operate under different planning processes, performance metrics, and funding rules. This fragmentation leads to duplicated efforts, inefficient use of funds, a lack of streamlined and scaffolded programs and resources, and unclear entry points for employers.

Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage and reward strategic combined state planning across federal education and workforce programs (such as Perkins V and WIOA) and signal how policies can serve as the bedrock for a robust statewide career pathway ecosystem.</li> <li>• Use discretionary funding to create incentives for states to meaningfully combine plans and establish consistent data, definitions, and road maps, and to braid and blend federal resources toward shared goals, including WBL.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that state plans intentionally sequence and scale WBL opportunities across the education-to-career continuum. This means moving beyond one-off exposure and designing coordinated pathways for participants to progress from career awareness and exploration to paid, experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, apprenticeships, and fellowships.</li> <li>• Align education, workforce, and economic development systems to support these structured pathways, to ensure that there are clear entry points for employers and learners and that they achieve stronger outcomes through sustained engagement over time.</li> <li>• Integrate WBL across education-to-career pathways by allowing WBL experiences to count toward high school graduation requirements.</li> <li>• Incentivize or support postsecondary institutions—including community colleges and four-year colleges and universities—to offer quality WBL opportunities that count toward academic credit.</li> </ul>

**Align Public and Private Partners****► Support and fund regional intermediaries.**

[Intermediaries](#) convene education providers, workforce agencies, and industry partners; manage logistics; support curriculum alignment; recruit students; and sometimes provide training themselves. They are essential in coordinating the WBL ecosystem, aligning partners, unlocking resources, and providing capacity to stakeholders who may not be able to take on the various administrative and compliance-related requirements of different WBL models, such as apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship. By handling administrative and coordination responsibilities, intermediaries can reduce the time, capacity, and cost barriers that often discourage employer participation in WBL. This is particularly true for small and medium-sized businesses. Regional intermediaries can ensure that WBL efforts are not only coordinated with local labor-market needs but are aligned to state resources, goals, and efforts as well as national opportunities.

**Federal and State Policymakers**

- Dedicate specific funds to support intermediary organizations while also continuing to allow existing public education and workforce funds to support intermediaries. These investments would help connect the supply and demand sides of the economy, provide necessary technical assistance to partners, and support general capacity concerns.
- Prioritize funding for sector partnerships that allow intermediaries to coordinate with large, midsize, and small employers across a sector, enabling broader and more coordinated industry participation in state and regional talent development efforts, including WBL.



## Recommendation 2: Enhance and Better Capitalize on Public Investments

WBL requires coordinated investments in employer engagement, career navigation, program supervision, data tracking, and learner supports. Public funding streams are often designed either for classroom instruction or employment-related services, not for integrated earn-and-learn models. As a result, programs often rely on short-term grants, local champions, or philanthropic support, which makes them difficult to sustain or scale. Policymakers should therefore both increase overall investment in WBL and update allowable uses of existing funds.

### ► Increase public investment in work-based learning.

Building a functioning WBL system has upfront and ongoing costs. Sustained public investment would ensure that WBL opportunities can be offered at scale.

Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase overall funding for WBL. This can be done through the creation of a new grant program that provides designated funding to states to support WBL infrastructure, such as a dedicated WBL office or team; increased resources for core programs that support WBL participation, such as Perkins V; WIOA Title I youth and adult programs; and apprenticeship funds. Investments in other related programs that have clear WBL components, including AmeriCorps, Federal Work Study, and summer youth employment programs, would also help to scale and sustain high-quality WBL models.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide dedicated funding streams for WBL. This includes time-bound grants as well as dedicated line items in state budgets. Funds should address the needs of all WBL partners, including K-12 and postsecondary education, community-based organizations, and workers. State investments should not only support the establishment of more WBL opportunities but also provide participants with financial supports (such as wages, transportation, and equipment) so they can enter and persist in their WBL experiences.</li> </ul>

Enhance and Better Capitalize on Public Investments

► **Strengthen financial incentives for employer participation.**

Employer participation can be a serious limiting factor in scaling WBL. While businesses benefit from these programs and strategies in the long term, it can be difficult to engage them at scale. Participation carries immediate costs and capacity requirements, including supervision of time, the provision of training resources, liability concerns, and administrative requirements.

Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in modernizing and updating federal technical assistance platforms to serve as centralized employer onboarding and program development hubs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that information on child labor and liability protections is accessible to employers, given that occupations often have different age minimums for participating in a WBL program.</li> </ul>

Federal and State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish an employer tax credit to incentivize small and midsize employers to offer Registered Apprenticeships and paid internships. Federal policymakers can focus on creating a national framework and providing baseline tax incentives, while states can provide complementary credits to meet regional workforce needs and expand employer participation. Articulating how employers are accountable for the credits, including supporting inputs and outputs such as enrollments, program completion, continued employment, and other agreed-upon variables, can ensure success. Additionally, they should also use grant programs or economic development incentives to reward grantees or businesses that provide high-quality work-based learning opportunities.</li> </ul>

## Enhance and Better Capitalize on Public Investments

### ► Better align and braid existing funding streams.

Many of the activities required to support WBL are already allowable under existing federal education, workforce, and human services programs. However, the governing statutes and regulations across those programs use different definitions and performance measures and have disparate planning requirements. As a result, states and local providers often implement similar initiatives separately because coordination is administratively difficult; consequently, resources that could support high-quality WBL are either underutilized or siloed across agencies. By coordinating education and workforce agencies around shared activities, states can blend and braid funding to finance WBL and related activities and supports.

### Federal and State Policymakers

- Provide clear guidance on and concrete examples of how states can braid and blend related federal education and workforce funds (from WIOA or Perkins V, for example) for WBL programs, including for apprenticeship. This will make it easier for states to understand how to best direct federal resources toward priority areas, including support for WBL models and initiatives. It will also help states engage in more strategic planning efforts and increase program enrollment.
- Policymakers should also issue joint federal guidance from relevant agencies, clarifying that programs such as those that fall under WIOA (including YouthBuild and JobCorps), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families can start using or continue to use available funds to support pre-apprenticeship and WBL activities.



**Strengthen Career Guidance and Basic Supports**

## Recommendation 3: Strengthen Career Guidance and Basic Supports

Expanding WBL opportunities requires more than creating placement opportunities. Learners must be able to find them, understand them, and successfully complete them. Many potential participants never enter WBL programs because they are unaware of available options. Additionally, even when opportunities exist and individuals are aware of them, potential participants may face other obstacles, such as wage loss or a lack of transportation and child care, that prevent them from enrolling or persisting.

Supportive services, including career guidance, are essential for driving participation in WBL.<sup>4</sup> Strengthening career guidance and providing access to supportive services allows a broader population of learners and workers to participate in WBL and helps employers retain participants once placed.

► **Build the knowledge and capacity of key stakeholders.**

Students, workers, and jobseekers often rely on school counselors, academic advisors, workforce case managers, and community-based organizers to understand available WBL opportunities, the regional job market, and postsecondary pathways. However, many professionals in those roles lack current information about apprenticeships, internships, or other high-quality WBL models to inform their interactions with individuals seeking support.

### State Policymakers

- Provide school and college counselors, public workforce system staff members, and other public program or community-based organization case managers with training to offer effective career coaching and guidance services for WBL participants. Contextualized and clear labor market data should be provided to those professionals to inform counseling practices.

**Strengthen Career Guidance and Basic Supports**

**Federal and State Policymakers**

- Invest in modern labor market information (LMI) systems and support states in building and maintaining statewide infrastructure for robust longitudinal data systems. States should ensure that those systems incorporate current and regionally relevant labor market data, provide learners and workers with easy-to-understand information on education-to-career outcomes and LMI tools, and remain sustainable over time.

► **Expand early career exploration.**

Opportunities to increase students’ awareness of WBL early in their educational journeys are often missed. Many students are not exposed to career pathways until late in high school, after key academic and postsecondary decisions have already been made. Early career exploration helps students and families understand the plethora of options available and which WBL experiences may be of interest to them.

**Federal Policymakers**

- Encourage early career exposure activities through existing education programs, such as Perkins V and ESSA, by prioritizing the creation of career pathway tools and resources that support engagement not only with students but with their families and caregivers.

**State Policymakers**

- Establish requirements for secondary education aimed at supporting student engagement in career exploration activities earlier (before they enter high school) and more often on their education journeys. These processes should include the creation of statewide definitions to clarify what career exploration is and what it should entail, and they should identify practices and strategies that can support active student engagement.

## Recommendation 4: Improve Accountability, Data Quality, and Transparency

Expanding WBL requires clear evidence that such models lead to real positive career outcomes. Today, education and workforce systems collect significant amounts of data, but WBL-related data is inconsistent, fragmented across agencies, and attached to a varying range of definitions and reporting timelines. For example, SNAP E&T requires states to track WBL participation, as well as whether participation leads to program completion, skills acquisition, and unsubsidized employment. Other programs, such as Perkins V, allow states to select WBL as a secondary performance indicator, but reporting requirements are often limited to participation counts alone. As a result, policymakers often struggle to evaluate return on investment, and learners lack reliable information about which opportunities align with their career aspirations.

Improvements to data quality and transparency can help policymakers direct resources toward effective WBL programs, support employer buy-in and participation, and enable learners to make more informed decisions about participating in earn-and-learn pathways.

### ► **Modernize workforce and education data systems and establish common data metrics and measures.**

Current data systems were designed to track either schooling or job placement—not integrated learning and work experiences. That makes it difficult for policymakers, practitioners, employers, and workers and learners themselves to follow and understand participant outcomes. It also makes it difficult to effectively measure the long-term impact of WBL programs and experiences and to identify commonalities and divergences in how WBL is being designed and administered across stakeholders, program models, systems, and geographies.

## Improve Accountability, Data Quality, and Transparency

## Federal Policymakers

- Incentivize universal measurements of WBL experiences across relevant federal statutes, and better align those metrics across programs. Ensure that programs encourage states to report on outcomes and efficacy so that state policymakers, practitioners, workers, learners, employers, and other relevant stakeholders can better understand WBL quality and impact. While federal programs don't all need to have identical reporting requirements, programs that do collect WBL data should align metrics and reporting processes where possible to improve comparability across systems and reduce administrative duplication. When appropriate, JFF's quality indicators can be used to inform standards and expected outcomes.
- Invest in a comprehensive, centralized repository for Registered Apprenticeship program data. The current Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Data System (RAPIDS) was designed for program registration, not outcomes tracking, and is not well-suited for data collection and reporting. System modernization would enable standardized analysis of the Registered Apprenticeship system and reduce administrative burdens on Registered Apprenticeship Partner (RAP) programs and employers.
- Help improve state leaders' ability to access and utilize unemployment insurance wage records by clarifying what states are responsible for through more robust, cross-agency guidance. This includes helping states understand what's needed for back-end matching of participants with wage records or other data sources to determine labor market outcomes.



### State Policymakers

- Create and pass legislation to enhance state unemployment insurance wage records to include data such as work location, job title, and occupation, to better understand employment outcomes at large.
- Invest in statewide longitudinal data systems. These systems should link information across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors, with collections of qualitative data so WBL programs and policymakers can gain a better understanding of stakeholder satisfaction and behaviors. They should perform robust analyses of these data collections to drive continuous program improvement. Statewide longitudinal data systems are critical to getting the outcome information needed, understanding the impact of programs, and identifying what is working and what needs to change.
- Define what “counts” as WBL (in line with the six criteria delineated in Perkins V), establish reporting elements associated with those standards, and incorporate WBL participation and completion into education and workforce accountability systems (such as high school graduation requirements).<sup>5</sup> Track credit attainment and skills gains, as well as longer-term outcomes, such as job retention and wage growth.



Improve Accountability, Data Quality, and Transparency

► Improve data transparency and use.

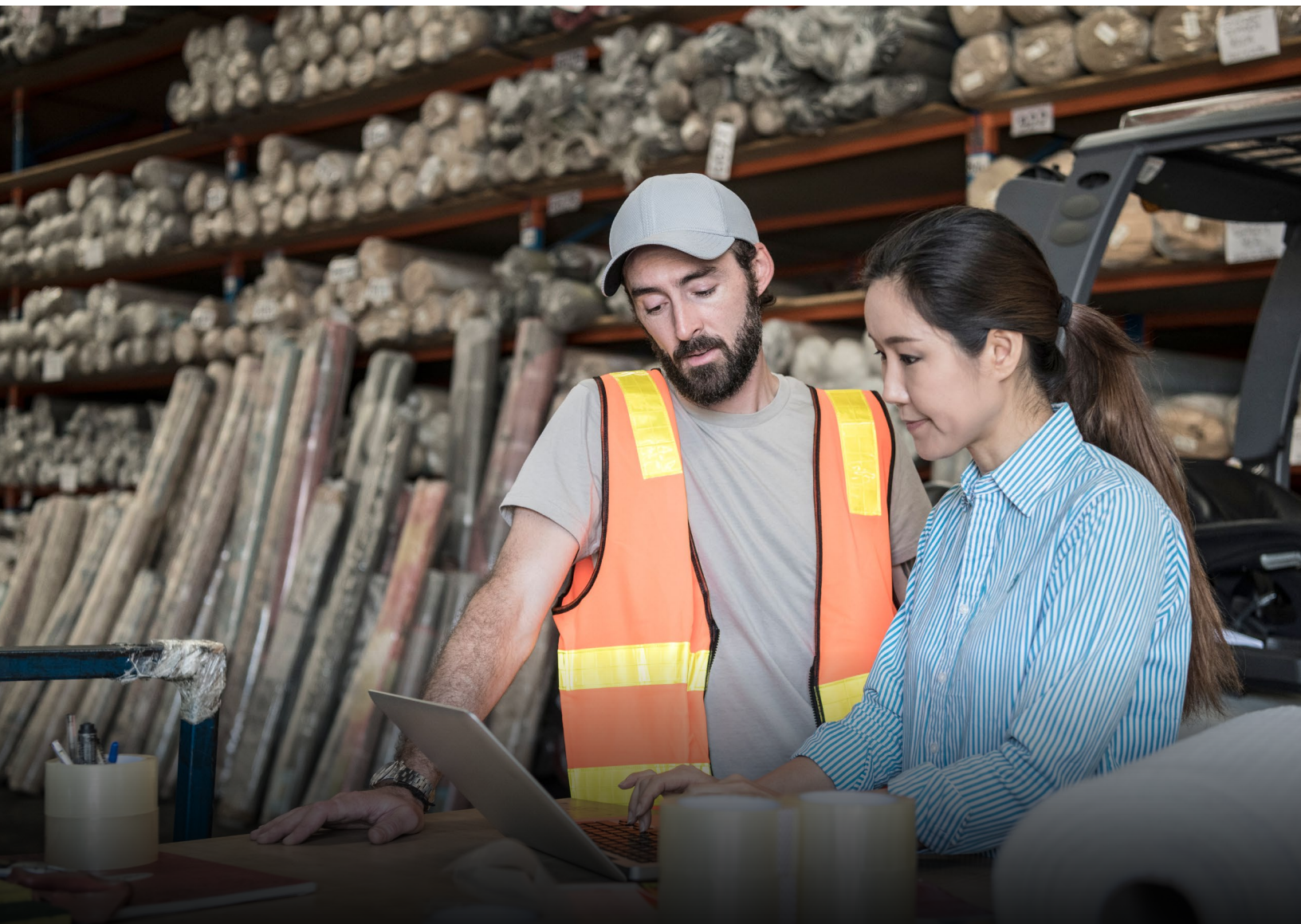
Data should guide decisions, not just satisfy compliance criteria. Access to outcome information helps learners choose pathways and helps employers understand the value of their own participation in WBL programs.

Federal Policymakers	State Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase investment in grant programs like the Workforce Data Quality Initiative, which supports the integration of workforce and education data, analysis of outcome data, and the development of public-facing tools that share performance data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create user-friendly dashboards showcasing WBL program offerings by duration, type, location, and industry sector; career pathways related to specific programs; and outcome data. Notably, RAPIDS data is inaccessible to the public; RAP data is communicated in a limited fashion at the discretion of the U.S. Department of Labor.</li> </ul>



## Recommendation 5: Pilot Innovative Delivery Models

WBL systems must continuously adapt to changes in technology, industry needs, and learner circumstances. Many current policies governing apprenticeships and other WBL models were designed around traditional, in-person training structures, which can limit experimentation with new approaches. Policymakers should create structured opportunities to test innovative practices and expand delivery models that allow more learners and employers to participate.



## Pilot Innovative Delivery Models

### ► Establish innovation pilots.

The creation of pilot opportunities that test new WBL strategies while maintaining accountability for outcomes can help policymakers unearth innovative strategies and evaluate promising practices before scaling them broadly across systems and stakeholders. Such efforts would also support ongoing work to modernize WBL systems.

#### Federal Policymakers

- Create discretionary grant programs or use current innovation funds, such as Perkins V or Education Innovation and Research grants, to test and research innovative WBL models, including apprenticeship. Pilots could focus on major challenges with WBL, including employer recruitment and retention and expansion into emerging industries. They could also focus on addressing challenges related to program alignment so that states or regions could braid or blend funds in new ways. Pilots should have an evaluation component and disseminate lessons learned to inform future guidance and legislation.
- Reform federal work-study programs so that they reach a larger portion of students, the work is connected to career-relevant experiences and WBL opportunities, and active job duties are connected to career-relevant competencies.

#### Federal and State Policymakers

- Consider using pilots to test and support the adoption of virtual and technology-enabled WBL. Geography, transportation barriers, scheduling constraints, and employer capacity can limit participation in traditional placements. Technology-enabled models—including virtual job shadowing, remote project-based learning, and online mentorship—can broaden learners' exposure to careers and connect them with employers that would otherwise be inaccessible.

# Policy in Action

Many states have been at the forefront of establishing policy approaches that strengthen and scale high-quality work-based learning. Building on the principles, definitions, and landscape analysis in earlier sections, this section highlights exemplars of supportive policy environments that align funding and accountability and clarify roles across agencies and intermediaries to expand WBL opportunities for learners and jobseekers.



## Tennessee

---

The state of Tennessee is working to build a culture of exploration and readiness among students by piloting new approaches to WBL. Its Innovative School Strategies (ISS) initiative seeks to engage middle and high school students in learning opportunities that will prepare them for college and career.<sup>6</sup> It embeds career-oriented instruction and work-based learning activities while delivering important supportive structures, such as mentorship, career navigation, and wraparound services. ISS programs engage with employers to ensure that career-oriented instruction and WBL are industry-aligned and remove barriers for more seamless connections between secondary/postsecondary education and the workforce. The state has invested more than \$560 million to support schools in designing and delivering new models and approaches, with specific resources dedicated to spurring employer engagement and participation.<sup>7</sup>

Tennessee has also supported the implementation of dual-enrollment work-based courses to expand access to career and education pathways for more students. That effort was led by JFF in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Education, and it was funded through an Education Innovation and Research grant. The initiative brought together nine regional partnerships comprising high schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers to offer courses that integrate work and learning in alignment with industry needs and demand. These college credit-bearing courses divide course competencies between the classroom setting and the workplace, with learning and performance in both settings contributing to

students' final grades. Partners have developed STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses and computer science pathways and have engaged employers such as Saint Francis Hospital, K.T.G. (USA) Inc., The Robinette Company, and Nissan USA in this new, blended WBL approach.

Outside of the K-12 system, Tennessee was the first state to sponsor an apprenticeship program for prospective teachers, called the Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program (RTAP).<sup>8</sup> RTAP, formerly known as the Grow Your Own initiative, was developed in response to a teacher shortage. The Grow Your Own Center, first established in 2022, serves as a local intermediary for learners and employers. As of 2024, the state had recorded nearly 700 teacher apprentices in training, and in 2025, the program was replicated to establish the Principal Registered Apprenticeship Program, with 120 apprentices participating in the first cohort.<sup>9</sup>

The state's commitment to piloting new interventions and applying innovative models has been informed by the goals it has established around work-based learning—all of which anchor the efforts and activities of education and workforce partners. The state's goals include broadening students' access to WBL by improving and adopting policies that help schools increase WBL activities; deepening learning experiences, with a specific focus on critical thinking, communication, and employability skills; and increasing engagement with communities to support more coordinated and sequential learning experiences.<sup>10</sup>



## Virginia

---

Virginia has been a powerhouse state in recognizing the need for strong WBL programs and providing layered statewide investments. Recently, Virginia Works (the state's workforce and apprenticeship agency), Virginia's community college system, the Virginia Department of Education, the Virginia State Council of Higher Education, and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership established a 2030 moonshot goal of giving every Virginian access to earn-and-learn opportunities. Registered Apprenticeships, paid internships, CTE, and other models of work-based learning are all part of the initiative. A cross-agency "moonshot team" is working to establish common definitions around WBL; build employer toolkits and other materials to align teams on the ground around employer engagement; and map connections between programs (such as pre-apprenticeships and internships). Virginia's Department of Education established a framework for [high-quality work-based learning \(HQWBL\)](#) that is anchored in CTE and designed to connect students across the state to employer-aligned activities that foster technical skills development. Virginia refers to these skills as the "Five C's": critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creative thinking, and citizenship. The [CTE HQWBL](#) initiative includes an implementation guide for practitioners, LMI, overviews of different WBL activities, and tools to support

student reflection and engagement. This new framework also establishes data collection methods to support continuous improvement and informed decision-making. The data collected facilitates a certification process to validate approved WBL activities.

Additionally, Virginia has invested in resources to strengthen the infrastructure needed to deliver high-quality work-based internships to postsecondary students. Among those investments are funds appropriated to the [State Council of Higher Education](#) to expand partnerships that increase internship opportunities in in-demand sectors. It has also created the [Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership](#), which engages the full spectrum of stakeholders, including the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, industry and employers, and postsecondary institutions, to further scale WBL. Virginia further supports internships through grant programs, such as the [Internship and Work-Based Learning Impact Grant](#), through which the state provides up to a 50% wage match for businesses that host student interns. A similar match is provided by [Internships Virginia](#), a program of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership that aims to increase employers' awareness of internships as a hiring pipeline and facilitates student access to internship opportunities. The [Work-Based Learning Comprehensive Data Collection Grant](#) offers additional support by providing funding specifically to build infrastructure and practices to support better and more consistent data collection. This funding addresses institutional data capacity, the development of data systems, and effective data sharing and analysis practices.

Internships aren't the state's only area of WBL focus. Virginia has established strong goals around growing the number of Registered Apprenticeships, increasing employer participation, and scaling on-ramps for youth and young adults. According to Virginia Works, the state recently reached the milestone of over 15,000 active apprenticeships—an increase of more than 40% from prior years—as well as the addition of almost 30 intermediaries to its apprenticeship ecosystem. It achieved this by colocating Registered Apprenticeship consultants in one-stop workforce centers across the state and piloting new tools, such as virtual apprenticeship expos, to connect employer sponsors with potential apprentices. The state's goals have been supported through grants and incentives, including multiple rounds of funding via the HIRE (Highlight, Include, Recruit, Engage, and Deliver) Apprenticeship Fund, which provides employers with per-apprentice training funds for new or expanding programs; teacher residency programs that enroll teacher and principal apprentices across Virginia; the Maritime and Nuclear Workforce Accelerator, which offers employer-driven training and reimbursements in those two key industries; and grant funding to support apprenticeship expansion into new industries and offset the costs of credential attainment in high-demand fields.<sup>11</sup>



## Maryland

---

Maryland has been a national leader in apprenticeship expansion, with multiple governors having championed the state's tried-and-true WBL program. In 2025, Maryland expanded access to HQWBL through legislation and financial investments under the Registered Apprenticeship Investments for a Stronger Economy (RAISE) Act.<sup>12</sup> The legislation does not simply establish grant programs and funding; it establishes important programs that address access and scale to a proven model across dimensions. For example, RAISE established the Incentive Pay Per Apprentice Program, which offsets hiring and training costs for employers, provides investments to grow apprenticeships through statewide intermediaries, and codifies journey-worker-to-apprentice ratios to support the expansion of apprenticeship to new industries. The act also established the Maryland Office of Registered Apprenticeship Development to ensure that there is dedicated infrastructure and staffing to support employers, training providers, intermediaries, and apprenticeship sponsors.

Through the Serving Every Region Through Vocational Exploration (SERVE) Act, passed in 2023, Maryland invested resources to expand learning experiences through public service.<sup>13</sup> Building on the quality hallmarks of programs like AmeriCorps, the state designed an initiative that provides participants with stipends, mentorship, intentional career exploration, opportunities for peer learning and social capital building, and pathways to employment and postsecondary education. Individuals who participate in the Service Year Option program enabled by the SERVE Act have the chance to work in industries such as climate, health care, and education, and can work with private businesses, nonprofits, or government agencies.



## Montana

---

Montana has made important efforts to expand access to work-based and career-connected learning. The state has invested over \$4 million through the Advanced Opportunities Program, a non-competitive grant program that supports school districts' efforts to deliver personalized instruction and CTE, dual-enrollment opportunities, certifications, and work-based learning programs to students.<sup>14</sup> The Montana Department of Labor and Industry's State Workforce Innovation Board designed the 406 JOBS Initiative, which was enacted through an executive order. The goal is to address labor shortages in key industries by removing barriers; defining pathways to work (such as apprenticeship, college, and entrepreneurship); and aligning CTE, career readiness, and apprenticeship programs with high-demand industries.<sup>15</sup> The state has also made strong investments in apprenticeship, including providing funding to support K-12 teacher pathways and tax credits to spur employer participation.<sup>16</sup>

State funding has been complemented by significant philanthropic investments that have helped Montana build important infrastructure and coordination across key stakeholders. The Montana Work-Based Learning Collaborative, led by Reach Higher Montana, is an example of how philanthropic investment is spurring the scale and expansion of WBL to more participation, employers, and areas of the state.<sup>17</sup> The collaborative serves as a critical intermediary, actively convening employers and industry associations, education and workforce partners, service providers, and other key stakeholders. Its goal is to ensure that the design and implementation of work-based and career-connected learning opportunities are responsive to labor market needs, effectively bridge work and education pathways, and are accessible to all youth and young adults in the state.

The collaborative also manages a statewide data dashboard that makes work-based and career-connected learning data publicly accessible.<sup>18</sup> The dashboard includes data on the range of activities happening across the state, youth experience and participation (across high school, college, and apprenticeship), employer and educator experiences, and the overall impact of WBL and career-connected learning on the state's workforce needs. Additionally, it aligns and connects with other statewide data systems to give employers, workers, and learners a broader understanding of the value of work-based and career-connected learning, and to support ongoing opportunities to scale and expand programming and partnership.



## Minnesota

---

Minnesota is using work-based learning to meet shifting labor market needs, including helping workers reskill and transition into new in-demand careers to address labor shortages, and supporting business and education partners to build the infrastructure, capacity, and relationships needed to hire, train, and retain talent.<sup>19</sup> For example, community-based organizations like Goodwill are engaging with pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs in the state to help individuals transition into the construction and manufacturing industries and access high-wage jobs and career pathways. Newly funded career development programs and internships are bringing employers and educators together to align classroom learning with technical skills training and to build early bridges to work and careers for high school students. CTE programs have become an anchor point for this work, with schools supporting a range of activities, including experiential learning, internships, and youth apprenticeship, to prepare students for careers.

The state's deep investment in WBL has ensured that education partners, employers of all sizes, and workers and learners statewide can engage with and participate in such programs. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, for example, runs five distinct grant programs that provide education partners with resources to build and expand employer partnerships, develop and facilitate job training activities, and upgrade equipment.<sup>20</sup> It also provides funding to businesses to implement skills training and invests in public, private, and nonprofit entities to expand training and access to employment for workers and learners who face barriers to employment. Minnesota also operates 16 grant programs focused on Registered Apprenticeship programs.<sup>21</sup> These initiatives support a wide range of activities, such as scaling existing industries (education, for example); supporting new and emerging industries (such as clean energy); implementing multi-employer/group sponsorship models; increasing apprenticeship access for women, tribal communities, and young people; and raising awareness of opportunities among high school staff and educators. Initiatives like Drive for 5 have brought a sector lens to this work, aligning WBL, career readiness, and job training activities with high-wage, high-growth jobs in five in-demand sectors: the caring professions, education, manufacturing, technology, and the trades.<sup>22</sup>



# Conclusion

Across the country, policymakers are increasingly recognizing that helping people successfully navigate from education to career requires stronger connections between learning and work. Work-based learning offers one of the most effective ways to close this gap, giving learners real-world experience while helping employers build the talent pipelines they need. Yet, while interest and experimentation are growing, many WBL opportunities remain fragmented across programs, systems, and funding streams. Sustaining and expanding high-quality WBL will require policymakers to move beyond isolated initiatives toward coordinated, system-level strategies.

As outlined in this policy blueprint, JFF's Work-Based Learning Framework provides a clear foundation for this effort. By organizing work-based learning across the continuum of career awareness, exploration, preparation, and experience—and grounding programming in six quality indicators—the framework emphasizes that quality and coherence matter as much as access. The policies outlined in this policy blueprint reflect that approach. Policymakers must align public and private partners to create shared definitions within WBL and reduce program fragmentation; enhance and better capitalize on existing investments across education and workforce systems; strengthen career guidance and supportive services so more learners can access and complete WBL experiences; improve accountability, data quality, and transparency to better measure outcomes; and create innovation pilots that allow states to test emerging models and expand access through new delivery approaches.

Encouragingly, many states are already demonstrating what strong WBL policy can look like in practice. WBL programs launched in Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, Montana, and Minnesota illustrate how clear definitions, sustained investment, employer engagement, and cross-system collaboration can expand people's access to high-quality work-based learning. By building on these state exemplars and embedding the policy recommendations outlined in this policy blueprint, policymakers can sustain and scale high-quality WBL systems that support learners and workers throughout their careers.

**When education and work are intentionally connected, the pathway from classroom to career becomes far more achievable.**

*Although the content of this resource was developed under funding from the Education Innovation and Research grant program, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.*

# Endnotes

- 1 Krysti Specht et al., “Work-Based Learning: From Information to Action,” Jobs for the Future, accessed June 9, 2026, <https://www.jff.org/idea/work-based-learning-framework>.
- 2 David Altstadt et al., How State Policy Can Transform Career Navigation for Young People: A 50-State Analysis (Boston, Massachusetts: Jobs for the Future, May 13, 2025), <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Policy-Career-Nav-Landscape-Analysis-Report-May-2025-2026.pdf>.
- 3 Altstadt et al., How State Policy Can Transform, <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Policy-Career-Nav-Landscape-Analysis-Report-May-2025-2026.pdf>.
- 4 Maura Kelly, Evaluation of the Effect of Supportive Services on the Success of Apprentices in a Highway Trade (Portland, Oregon: Portland State University, July 2013), [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=soc\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=soc_fac).
- 5 The six comprehensive local needs assessment criteria that states must meet under Perkins V involve student performance; program alignment with market needs; the size, scope, and quality of the program; progress toward program implementation; recruitment, retention, and training of faculty or staff members; and improvements in student access.
- 6 “Innovative School Strategies,” Future Ready Tennessee, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://futureready.tnedu.gov/pillar-2/innovative-school-strategies>.
- 7 “TDOE Awards \$560M in Innovative School Models Grants,” Tennessee Department of Education, May 16, 2023, <https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2023/5/16/tdoe-awards--560m-in-innovative-school-models-grants-.html>.
- 8 “Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program,” Tennessee Department of Education, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://www.tn.gov/education/rtap.html>.
- 9 Office Of Apprenticeship, “Data and Statistics,” Apprenticeship.gov, n.d., <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/data-and-statistics>.
- 10 “Introduction to Work-Based Learning,” Tennessee Department of Education, accessed June 2, 2026, [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/ccte/wbl/wbl\\_introduction\\_to\\_wbl.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/ccte/wbl/wbl_introduction_to_wbl.pdf).

- 11 “Announcing Virginia’s HIRED Apprenticeship Fund,” Virginia Works, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://viriniaworks.gov/apprenticeship-fund>; “Educator Residency and Apprenticeship Programs,” Virginia Department of Education, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/teacher-residency-and-apprenticeship-programs>; “Announcing Virginia’s Virginia Maritime & Nuclear Workforce Accelerator,” Virginia Works, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://viriniaworks.gov/maritime-nuclear-accelerator>; “Workforce Credential Grant,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://www.schev.edu/financial-aid/financial-aid/federal-state-financial-aid/workforce-credential-grant>.
- 12 State of Maryland, RAISE Act of 2025—Overview Doc (Annapolis, Maryland: Office of the Governor, n.d.), [https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte\\_testimony/2025/ecm/1gbFqvmtc5XtrGpzGqE0TMVict5IFRs1A.pdf](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2025/ecm/1gbFqvmtc5XtrGpzGqE0TMVict5IFRs1A.pdf).
- 13 “Governor Moore Launches Service Year Option, First-in-the-Nation Public Service Year Program for High School Graduates,” The Office of Governor Wes Moore, October 27, 2023, <https://governor.maryland.gov/news/press-releases/governor-moore-launches-service-year-option-first-nation-public-service-year-program-high-school>.
- 14 “Montana Advanced Opportunities - SB278,” Office of Public Instruction, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://opi.mt.gov/Leadership/Academic-Success/Montana-Advanced-Opportunities>.
- 15 406 Jobs: Modernizing Montana’s Workforce (Helena, Montana: Montana Department of Labor and Industry, August 2025), [https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2025-2026/STRC/August-25-2025/406\\_Jobs\\_Handout.pdf](https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2025-2026/STRC/August-25-2025/406_Jobs_Handout.pdf).
- 16 “Governor Gianforte, DLI Announces \$4 Million Investment in Montana’s First Teacher Apprenticeship Program,” Governor’s Office, July 14, 2025, <https://news.mt.gov/Governors-Office/Governor-Gianforte-DLI-Announces-4-Million-Investment-in-Montanas-First-Teacher-Apprenticeship-Program>.
- 17 “Montana Work-Based Learning Collaborative,” Montana Work-Based Learning Collaborative, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://wblmt.org>; “Help for Students Planning Their Future After High School,” Reach Higher Montana, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://reachhighermontana.org>.
- 18 “Work-Based Learning Collaborative Data Dashboard,” Work-Based Learning Collaborative, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://wblmt.org/data-dashboard>.
- 19 Dee DePass, “Minnesota Invests \$100 Million in Career Development Programs,” Governing, August 9, 2024, <https://www.governing.com/workforce/minnesota-invests-100-million-in-career-development-programs>.
- 20 “Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry,” Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://www.dli.mn.gov>.
- 21 “Grants,” Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, accessed June 2, 2026, <https://www.dli.mn.gov/grants>.
- 22 “Governor Walz Announces Millions in Workforce Training Grants,” Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan, December 23, 2025, <https://mn.gov/governor/newsroom/press-releases/?id=1055-717314>.



Building a Future  
That Works  
**For Everyone**