



Setting a Statewide Vision for Work-based Learning

THE STATE'S ROLE IN WORK-BASED LEARNING

As the nation's education leaders and employers seek to work together to create a well-prepared, competitive workforce, work-based learning – a strategy that has existed for decades – is back in the spotlight as an effective strategy for connecting students' classroom learning to their future careers.

With this renewed interest, the work-based learning of today is being transformed as a means to build on students' academic experience and career interests, rather than simply to release them from the school day for work that is unconnected to their education. Work-based learning can and should be available to all students regardless of whether they are enrolled in a Career Technical Education (CTE) program of study or not. What is most important is that the experience is informed by workplace standards and is connected to students' classroom learning as a means to provide context and relevancy.

The *Connecting the Classroom to Careers* series takes a closer look at the state's role in expanding high-quality work-based learning opportunities for all students, with a particular focus on untangling the major barriers at the K-12 level.

Each installment will explore a specific issue and highlight innovative or leading state approaches, as well as key policy questions and relevant resources that state and local leaders should consider as they examine their own systems.

What is Work-based Learning?

Work-based learning is an educational strategy that offers students an opportunity to reinforce and deepen their classroom learning, explore future career fields and demonstrate their skills in an authentic setting.

This series defines work-based learning as a continuum of experiences that helps prepare students for postsecondary education and careers. High-quality work-based learning should begin in the early grades with activities that help build students' awareness of possible careers. This exploration continues through middle and high school with job shadowing or mentoring to better inform students' decision making, and culminates with more intensive career preparation activities such as school-based enterprises, internships and pre-apprenticeships as students move along in their career pathway from high school to postsecondary education.¹

THE STATE'S ROLE IN SETTING A VISION FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING

While much of the hard work to identify, establish and sustain work-based learning is a local endeavor between schools and employers, the state does have a role in creating an environment that enables these opportunities to grow, flourish and multiply. States have an important role and obligation to set a clear vision for work-based learning and provide guidance as to how it should be defined, delivered and integrated into existing efforts and programs.

By setting a statewide vision, a state can help ensure new and existing work-based learning opportunities align with related policies and initiatives in a thoughtful, intentional way so work-based learning becomes integrated into the state policy environment and students' career pathways. A statewide vision sets common expectations and resources for those managing work-based learning experiences on the ground, and serves as a platform for building consensus

through meaningful and sustained stakeholder engagement, particularly with employers as critical partners.

KEY QUESTIONS WHEN SETTING A STATEWIDE VISION FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING

As state leaders begin to explore and build out their statewide strategy for work-based learning, there are a number of key questions and issues they should take into consideration, including:

Assessing the Current Landscape

- How does, or will, your state define work-based learning? What are the range of activities and experiences that fit within the full work-based learning continuum?
- What state policies currently support or incentivize work-based learning along the full continuum in your state?
- What are the positive outcomes of these policies or programs? Where do they fall short?
- What state policies may prohibit or limit work-based learning along the full continuum in your state?
- What strategies exist for addressing such barriers to work-based learning?
- What federal policies help support or guide work-based learning in your state? How do your state policies reflect, align or interact with those at the federal level?
- Are there successful local practices or elements that could be scaled? Are there models in other states to consider?

Developing a Vision for Work-based Learning

- What is the goal your state wants to achieve (e.g., to broaden access to high-quality work-based learning for all students or those within CTE programs of study? To provide at least one work-based learning experience for students or tiered experiences?)
- Is this vision consistent across secondary, postsecondary and workforce development? If there are separate visions, will they be connected in some way and how?

- Who needs to be involved in the development of a statewide vision for work-based learning?
- What current opportunities exist or need to be established to bring those stakeholders and partners, and in particular employers, into the planning process?
- What other programs and reforms should be taken into consideration when setting a vision for work-based learning to support their alignment (e.g., program development, guidance/counseling, professional development and credit by proficiency)?
- What efforts or measures can be put in place to ensure that students walk away from their work-based learning experiences having practiced and demonstrated key skills and competencies?
- How is, or will, the vision be embedded or reflected in the relevant state agency's overall strategic plan?

Implementing the New Vision for Work-based Learning

- How will your state know if it has been successful in achieving its new vision for work-based learning?
- How has or will your state work with locals to help them align their existing work-based learning efforts and/or establish new work-based learning opportunities for students?
- How will your state communicate its vision for work-based learning with key stakeholders such as educators, employers, students and parents?

TENNESSEE'S STATEWIDE VISION AND STRATEGY FOR STRENGTHENING WORK-BASED LEARNING

In 2013, Governor Bill Haslam launched his [Drive to 55](#) campaign, challenging his state to increase the number of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate to 55 percent by the year 2025. Under this campaign are a number of coordinated initiatives focused on helping the state meet this goal.

Across the state and at every level of government, conversations began in earnest to ensure learners at all levels have the opportunity to gain the academic, technical and employability skills that they need to be successful in college and careers. For high school students to graduate prepared, developing this skill base requires more than classroom-based experiences alone. It requires a braided approach to align classroom-based knowledge with real-world experience.

Within this context, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) embarked on a comprehensive, multi-year overhaul of its CTE course standards, launched the state's [Pathways Tennessee](#) initiative, and set out to overhaul its work-based learning policies and practices. As a first step, the TDOE led an assessment of the state's K-12 work-based learning programs and found there was much work to be done to ensure more equitable access to rigorous and meaningful work-based learning experiences throughout the state. The Department believes that high-quality work-based learning experiences can be a primary driver to motivate and propel students to high school graduation and beyond. Yet, for this to happen, a comprehensive reform strategy to revitalize work-based learning was necessary to set higher expectations for program management while improving district capacity to support student learning outcomes.

DRIVE TO 55 – A WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Positioning itself as more than a mission for higher education, the state's Drive to 55 campaign has three main initiatives:

- [Tennessee Promise](#): Offers two years of tuition-free community or technical college to the state's high school graduates.
- [Tennessee Reconnect](#): Allows adults to attend and earn a diploma or certificate from the state's technical colleges free of tuition and fees.
- [Tennessee LEAP](#) (Labor Education Alignment Program): Provides grants to regional partnerships of K-12, postsecondary institutions and employers to eliminate skills gaps by encouraging collaboration and alignment across education and industry.

ESTABLISHING A VISION FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING

As with many other initiatives in Tennessee, true reform of work-based learning needed to start with a clear and consistent vision and a commitment to shared outcomes across a diverse set of stakeholders. To have a true impact on students, a shared vision for work-based learning was necessary in order to develop buy-in from districts and educators and in turn, drive the systemic changes in mindsets and practices across the state.

The Department set a goal to develop and implement a revitalized model for work-based learning that would be scalable, rigorous and serve as a national model. To do this, the TDOE dedicated staff to drive this work and oversee the statewide rollout. After analyzing the statewide assessment, the TDOE crafted a progressive, skills-focused model for work-based learning, and set out across the state to gather input, generate support and discuss practical solutions for true reform. The result was a shared vision that resonated with diverse stakeholders and drove the remaining phases of this work (*see Table 2*), ensuring positive reception to the newly developed policies, curriculum, and professional development across critical stakeholder groups, including educators, counselors, employers, and higher education.

TENNESSEE'S VISION FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING

Every student in Tennessee will prepare for further education and long-term careers in an increasingly complex global economy by exploring careers, understanding their own strengths and interests, and learning through hands-on application of valuable employability skills.

We believe: Work-based learning will help ensure a skilled workforce pipeline for Tennessee's growing industries. It benefits communities and families by promoting thriving local and regional economies. Educators, industry, communities and families will work together to create a world-class work-based learning system with broad-based, efficient and effective participation of all stakeholders at statewide, regional, and local levels.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education

The TDOE's vision is grounded in the belief that work-based learning is a proactive approach to bridging the gap between education and the world of work. As such, critical career awareness activities should start as early as elementary or middle school to help build students' broad understanding of industries and possible careers. Over time, these experiences should become more focused as students discover their interests, learn what postsecondary education they will need, and practice the technical and employability skills to enter these careers later in life. At its zenith, students may participate in credit-bearing capstone experiences such as apprenticeships, internships, clinicals, and practicums that may lead directly to employment. (See Table 1)

This vision is also embedded in the TDOE's [strategic plan](#), particularly within two key areas: "High School and Bridge to Postsecondary" and "All Means All." Connecting work-based learning to the "All Means All" strategic goal provided an important distinction for the state's newly overhauled program – work-based learning can and should be accessible for all students, not just those in CTE courses. The work-based learning framework, resources and standards were all designed with the intention of being used in both general education and CTE courses.

Further, to bring the vision from theory to practice, state policies and standards were re-written to support school districts in implementing this revitalized model. The policies were crafted with three goals in mind: to promote student learning, quality programs and regional workforce needs. For example, the State Board of Education amended its [High School Policy](#) to include the six-point work-based learning framework, which states that students "will have access to a system of structured work-based learning (WBL) experiences that allows them to apply classroom theories to practical problems and to explore career options," and covers policy implications from program structure to student assessment. This vision has now been translated into a comprehensive and iterative, multi-phase implementation strategy.

Table 1: Tennessee's Continuum of Work-based Learning

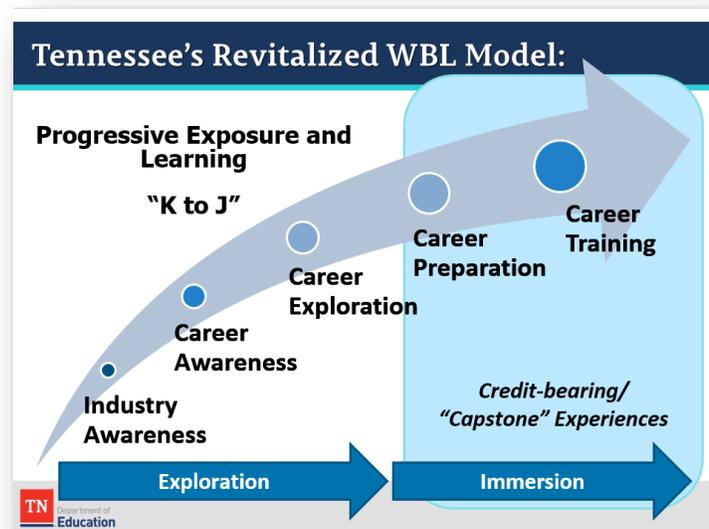


Table 2: Tennessee's Four Phases to Develop and Implement Work-based Learning Program**2013 - Statewide Assessment of Existing Efforts**

- Survey and Focus Groups: 437 survey respondents including CTE directors, counselors and work-based learning coordinators, 225 focus group participants, over 75 industry partners
- Other notable stakeholders included: Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Department of Economic and Community Development, Tennessee Board of Regents, State Board of Education, and Pathways Tennessee Statewide Planning Team

2013-14 - Revising and Developing Policies and Standards

- Revisions to State Board of Education rules and policies (Rule 0520-01-03-.06. (2) (b) 3); (High School Policy 2.103)
- Revision of TDOE Work-based Learning Policy Guide
- Development of Work-based Learning Career Practicum Course Standards

2014-15 - Work-based Learning Pilot Program

- Representatives from five diverse districts worked closely with the TDOE to review state board rule and policy language, TDOE policies, course standards, and training materials
- After reviewing, the districts implemented these changes to fully understand the implications of each change, and provided feedback to TDOE
- Participating School Districts included Anderson County, Clarksville-Montgomery, Gibson Special School District, Moore County, and Rutherford County Schools. Many of these individuals now serve as members of the state's Work-based Learning Leadership Council and as work-based learning trainers

2015-16 - Statewide Rollout

- Developed a tiered professional development and implementation strategy:
 - *Work-based Learning Leadership Council* of expert practitioners/trainers serve as state advisors and are located in eight regions across the state to offer professional development and peer coaching
 - *Work-based Learning Certification Training* offered by state trainers in east, middle and west Tennessee multiple times per year
 - *Work-based Learning Professional Learning Communities* promote continuous improvement and are led by the Leadership Council members in eight regions
- Additional professional development resources support local professional development and continuous improvement: *Work-based Learning Implementation Guide and Toolbox*

LESSONS LEARNED

As with any convening of partners, building consensus is critical but not necessarily easy. While most stakeholders could agree on key elements of work-based learning, the TDOE realized that it had to break down both real and perceived barriers around work-based learning for school districts and employers in order to gain necessary momentum around this revitalized model.

Several key lessons became clear to TDOE leaders while undergoing this process:

- Be prepared to “go the distance” to achieve true reform. The state did not set out to extensively rewrite state board rules and policies when beginning this overhaul, yet it became necessary to fully meet its strong vision for work-based learning.
- Create capacity to drive these changes and ensure seamless coordination with other ongoing state reforms, which may require dedicated staff or additional dollars at the state level to ensure depth and breadth of implementation, as well as coordination with other state agencies working on career pathways.
- Initiate a cultural shift requires local buy-in and advocates who can speak on behalf of the changes with their peers.
- Key stakeholders, in particular employers, should be engaged at every turn to vet and review proposed changes.
- Recognize the range of work-based learning experiences – from earlier, shorter-term experiences to more rigorous work-based learning capstones – and understand the value of each experience for students.
- Create a vision and model for work-based learning that can be locally customized to gather implementation and buy-in at the local level.
- Adequately support teachers and work-based learning coordinators for quality programs to grow and flourish. This may require professional development in building employer relationships, facilitating student reflection time and local program continuous improvement.
- Recognize that employers and educators want the same results for students, but often speak a different language. Having a shared vision helps open doors of opportunity because all stakeholders have agreed on the core tenets.

TENNESSEE'S RESOURCES

- [Tennessee State Board of Education Policy on Work-based Learning](#) and [High School Policy 2.103](#) – Work-based learning model codified in state policy
- [Work-based Learning Policy Guide](#) – Revised to reflect new model
- [Career Exploration Course Standards](#)
- [Service Learning](#)
- [Career Practicum Course Standards](#)
- [Implementation Guide](#) – A professional development tool to assist districts as they support and grow their own programs
- [Work-based Learning Toolbox](#) – A supplement to the Implementation Guide; includes resources designed to assist with all stages of the planning and implementation process
- [Student Skills Rubric](#) – Rubric for assessing employability skills
- [Work-based Learning 101 for Industry](#) – For recruiting industry partners
- [Portfolio Rubric](#) – For assessing quality of student portfolio

Acknowledgments

The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) would like to give special thanks to the Tennessee Department of Education's Division of College, Career & Technical Education – in particular to Dr. Danielle Mezera, Assistant Commissioner for Career Technical Education, for enabling this report, and Chelsea Parker, Executive Director for Work-based Learning, for providing her time and expertise. Additionally, NASDCTEc wishes to thank the New Jersey Department of Education's Office of Career Readiness for reviewing this report and offering guidance.

ⁱ Darche, S. et al. (2009). “Work-based Learning in California: Opportunities and Models for Expansion.” <http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/downloads/WBLReport.pdf>