

Promoting Work-Based Learning: Efforts in Connecticut and Kentucky

In the summer of 2012, the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) and the Alliance for Excellent Education conducted a survey of State Directors of Career Technical Education (CTE) to gauge state efforts to better connect CTE with a larger college- and career-readiness agenda. Survey questions spanned a range of issues, including whether each state had developed a definition of career readiness, the number of career academies in each state, and what states are doing to formally identify and remove barriers to work-based learning opportunities in policy and practice. This brief includes a short description of efforts from two states—Connecticut and Kentucky—to define work-based learning opportunities for youth participants, educators, and employers, and to create policies that provide greater access to these opportunities.

What Is Work-Based Learning?

Work-based learning consists of a range of experiences that help prepare students for postsecondary education and a career by extending and deepening classroom learning. High-quality work-based learning includes a continuum of experiences, such as career awareness beginning in the early grades; career exploration in the middle and high school grades; practicum experiences that allow for the application of academic concepts through real-world experience and engagement with adults outside of high school; and career preparation at the secondary and postsecondary levels. These experiences can be facilitated through a variety of activities, including job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and service-learning projects in high school and beyond.¹ See Table 1 below.

Table 1. A Continuum of Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Work-based Learning Component	What It Accomplishes	When It Occurs
Career Awareness	Helps students build awareness of available careers and to begin identifying areas of interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary school • Middle school
Career Exploration	Allows students to explore career options, and better informs decisionmaking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle school • High school
Career Practicum	Provides students with experiences that deepen classroom learning and supports the development of college and career readiness through real-world experiences and engagement with adults outside of school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school
Career Preparation	Prepares students for entry into a career pathway.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school • Postsecondary school

Work-based learning can convey a variety of benefits to students. When coordinated with students' academic course work, work-based learning can reinforce and strengthen academic competencies. By allowing students to apply what they are learning to real-life situations and problems of significance, work-based learning opportunities can help participants develop twenty-first-century skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and project management. Further, by providing students first-hand exposure to jobs and industry professionals, work-based learning can broaden career aspirations and employment options and employability skills. For example, a study by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education finds that students participating in work-based learning showed improvements in attendance, speaking and listening, and improved interactions with coworkers.²

However, despite these benefits, there are a variety of state and local obstacles that can limit both the access to and quality of work-based learning opportunities. Such obstacles include

- state and local seat-time requirements that prevent students from attaining academic credit for learning opportunities that take place outside of the school building;
- lack of funding for transportation to and from work-based learning opportunities and limited district bus schedules that may restrict transportation to certain locations at certain times;
- liability concerns, particularly safety;
- logistical and financial constraints in providing compensation to participants; and
- lack of a formal definition describing high-quality work-based learning experiences.³

State Examples

The challenges listed above require action on the part of states to provide higher-quality experiences for students and an easier pathway to engagement for schools and businesses. Realizing the potential benefits of preparing students for college and a career, as well as the longer-term economic benefits of work-based learning, many states have been proactive in dealing with some of the barriers to work-based learning opportunities. Below are examples of how Connecticut and Kentucky have addressed some of the above-mentioned obstacles.

Connecticut

Connecticut's efforts have focused on defining work-based learning more clearly and addressing liability and safety issues. In 2002, the state adopted a definition of work-based learning to promote higher-quality practices across the state that ensure safety, structure, a focus on students' postsecondary plans, and opportunities for mentoring. The state defines work-based learning as instruction that "includes worksite experience, including all major activities related to the career cluster."^{4,5} The specific work experience must

- be paid;⁶
- be coordinated with school-based instruction;
- include instruction, to the extent practicable, and in all aspects of an industry;
- relate to academic, technical, and employability skills;
- include, but not be limited to, structured, mentored experiences, such as job-shadowing, career exploration, on-the-job training, paid or Connecticut State Department of Education (CTSDE)– and

Connecticut Department of Labor (CTDOL)–approved unpaid internships, community service opportunities, senior capstone projects, and field trips; and

- be conducted in accordance with an individualized student success plan and a written training and mentoring plan, agreed to by the student (and the student’s parents if the student is under eighteen years of age), the principal of the school where the student is enrolled, the workplace mentor, and the employer.⁷

One of the key barriers to work-based learning opportunities is the blanket exclusion of participants from working in settings that may pose greater risks to students than if learning were to be confined to a traditional school building. In an effort to ensure both safety and access to high-quality work-based learning experiences, CTSDE and CTDOL created a process to assess and address the risks posed to students engaging in high-risk work-based learning opportunities, such as health occupations and manufacturing. This collaboration between CTSDE and CTDOL resulted in the creation of a CTDOL waiver from state regulations that place an age restriction on participation in work-based learning opportunities in certain industries. The waiver allows sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students who are enrolled in approved CTE programs to be placed in otherwise prohibited industries for their work-based learning experiences.

Another example of the state’s efforts to enlist structures to support student safety and access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities is the Connecticut Young Worker Safety Team, a state-level collaborative team comprised of Connecticut’s Departments of Education, Labor, and Public Health, as well as a division of the CTDOL called Occupational Safety and Health. The team is responsible for overseeing train-the-trainer sessions on workplace safety; collecting and monitoring data on workplace injuries of young workers; and facilitating workshops for teachers on worker safety for students participating in work-based learning. Additionally, in order to better coordinate activities and facilitate higher-quality work-based learning opportunities for participating students, the state requires active participation from the school and the employer in designing work-based learning opportunities.⁸

Kentucky

In addition to working to remove potential barriers to work-based learning such as seat time,⁹ Kentucky’s efforts focus on what constitutes high-quality work-based learning opportunities so that schools, businesses, and community organizations are operating with a common understanding of the standard types of experiences participants should be provided. In Kentucky, work-based learning opportunities are defined as “structured activities incorporated in the curriculum, which apply knowledge and skills learned in class and connect these learning opportunities to experiences at work.”¹⁰

Kentucky has also addressed barriers to work-based learning experiences and provided incentives for participation, particularly around the issue of seat time and credits. Kentucky provides an avenue for students to participate in a paid educational program that consists of in-school instruction combined with on-the-job experiences. The state also provides academic credit in CTE programs equivalent to one Carnegie unit for on-the-job experiences completed through cooperative education contingent upon one of two factors: (1) the student’s enrollment in a related CTE course and time spent on the job during school hours, or (2) an equivalent amount of time based on daily work schedules identified in the Work-Based Learning Plan agreement between the student, school, and participating employer.¹¹ This action, in particular, has helped promote work-based learning by allowing a student’s participation in work-based learning to contribute to earning the academic credit necessary to achieve a student’s goal of attaining a high school degree.

Conclusion

When work-based learning is done well, experiences can benefit students, schools, and employers. Nevertheless, logistical and policy barriers to providing more youth with access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities must be addressed. Recognizing the benefits of work-based learning opportunities, Connecticut and Kentucky have taken strides to ensure more students are provided work-based learning opportunities without sacrificing student safety or the quality of experiences. While there is still more work to be done, these efforts represent examples of how states can be proactive in ensuring that more students have high-quality educational experiences today that will prepare them for success in the workforce tomorrow.

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Endnotes

- ¹ S. Darche, N. Nayar, and K. Reeves Bracco, *Work-Based Learning in California: Opportunities and Models for Expansion* (San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2009), http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/workbasedlearning.pdf (accessed May 1, 2012); Linked Learning Alliance, *Career Practicum: A Work Based Learning Strategy* (Sacramento, CA: Author, 2011), http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/direct/files/LLAWBLCareerPracticum_FINAL_10-5-11_noLLA%20logo.pdf (accessed May 2, 2012).
- ² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan Skill Gain Study*, (Malden, MA: Author, 2007), <http://skillslibrary.com/wbl/skillgain1.htm> (accessed May 1, 2012).
- ³ Darche et al., *Work-Based Learning in California*.
- ⁴ The National Career Clusters™ framework—created by NASDCTEc—provides a vital structure for organizing and delivering quality CTE programs through learning and comprehensive programs of study (POS). In total, there are sixteen career clusters in the National Career Clusters™ framework, representing more than seventy-nine career pathways to help students navigate their way to greater success in college and a career.
- ⁵ General Statutes of Connecticut, Title 10, Chapter 164, Educational Opportunities, Sec. 10-20a, <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2011/pub/chap164.htm#Sec10-20a.htm> (accessed May 1, 2012).
- ⁶ The specific work experience must be paid unless the employer or principal puts in a request to the state’s labor commissioner that it be unpaid because of worksite experiences that are generally not paid, i.e., community service activities. (Specifically, CTDOL will only approve unpaid volunteer positions in documented not-for-profit organizations. In those instances, there is a CTDOL and CTSDE waiver to Connecticut’s minimum wage law that the school must submit for approval by the CTDOL before the student begins the structured work-based learning experience.)
- ⁷ General Statutes of Connecticut, Title 10, Chapter 164, Educational Opportunities, Sec. 10-20a.
- ⁸ General Statutes of Connecticut, Title 31, Chapter 557, Employment Regulations, Sec. 31-23, <http://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap557.htm#Sec31-23.htm> (accessed May 1, 2012).
- ⁹ Seat time requirements limit the credit students may attain toward high school graduation to experiences that occur within the school building and school day.
- ¹⁰ Kentucky Department of Education, *Worked-Based Learning Manual* (Frankfurt, KY: Author, 2008), <http://www.education.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/C534CFD6-8BB5-42C9-8713-966B0CFE559E/0/WorkBasedLearningManual.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2012).
- ¹¹ Kentucky Department of Education, *Worked-Based Learning Manual*.