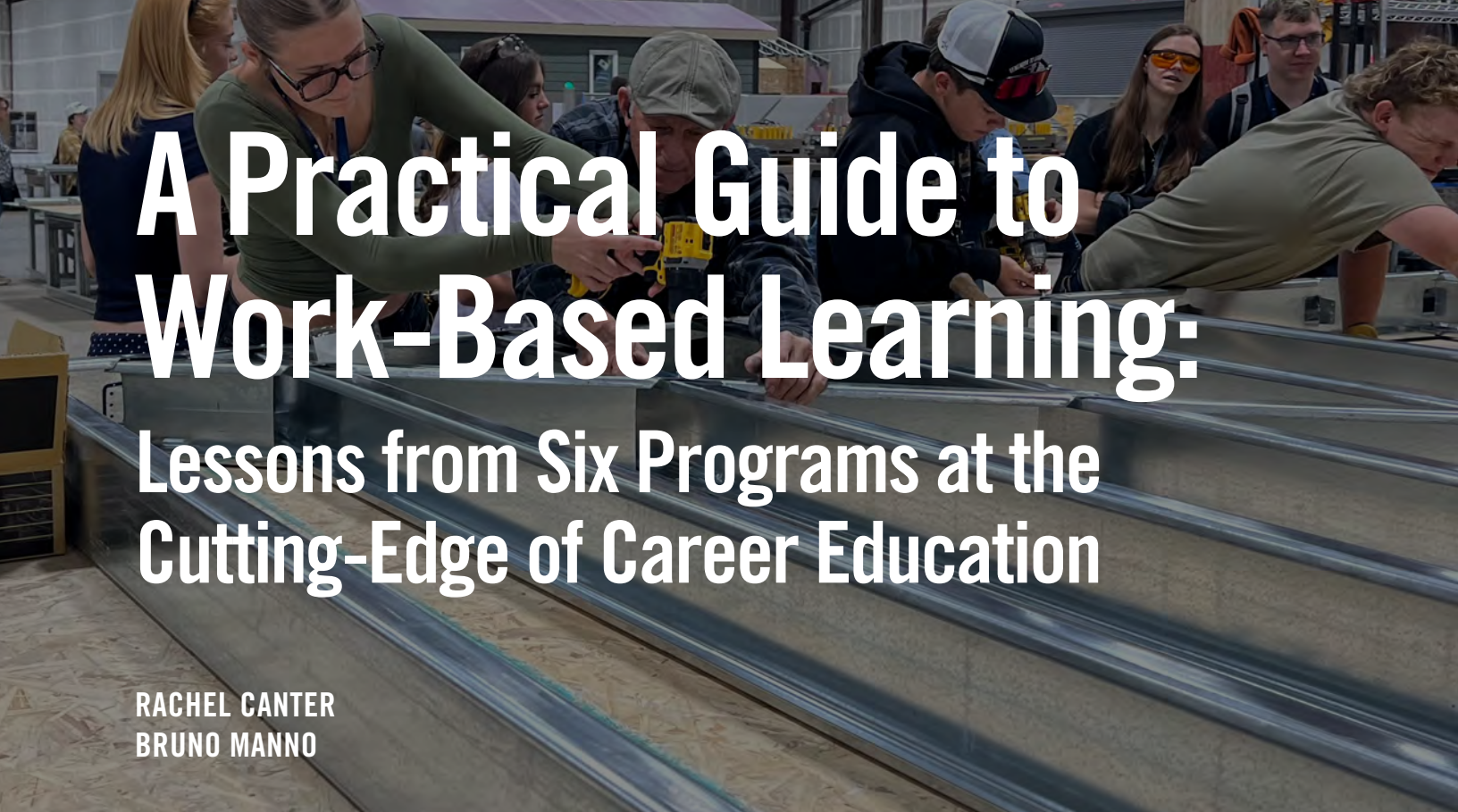


A group of students in a workshop setting, wearing safety glasses and working on a long metal track.

A Practical Guide to Work-Based Learning: Lessons from Six Programs at the Cutting-Edge of Career Education

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PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
JULY 2026

A collage of two images. The left image shows two female students in a workshop, wearing safety glasses and looking at a machine. The right image shows three students in green protective suits and hoods, using VR headsets in a workshop setting.

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Executive Summary

Career education programs that include work-based learning are becoming an important part of American high schools. At their best, these programs connect classroom learning with real work experience, giving students a chance to explore careers, build practical skills, learn workplace habits, and understand how academic knowledge is used beyond school.

Increasingly, the most promising models connect school, work, and postsecondary preparation through career pathways that allow students to gain real experience while still in high school. Students may participate in job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, simulated workplaces, or service-learning projects. The strongest programs are not simply jobs for students. In high-quality programs, students perform real tasks, receive adult supervision and feedback, work toward clear learning goals, and connect the experience to a broader pathway that may include credentials, college credit, further training, or employment. They are structured learning experiences tied to school goals, employer expectations, and future educational or career opportunities.

These programs reflect a broader movement toward a model we call *opportunity pluralism*.¹ The idea is that young people should have more than one credible route to a good and dignified life. In K-12 education, opportunity pluralism means moving beyond a single expected path

from high school to a four-year college and then to a career. It supports multiple pathways that combine academic knowledge, career-oriented skills, credentials, and professional networks. Unlike old-style vocational tracking, which too often narrowed opportunity, opportunity pluralism aims to expand it such that students leave high school not only with a diploma but also with college credit. That includes college credit, industry-recognized credentials, supervised work experience, employer relationships, and a clearer sense of what comes next.

This report draws on interviews with leaders from six work-based learning programs across the country: CAST Schools in San Antonio, Texas; the Career Academy Network of Public Charter Schools in South Bend, Indiana; the Fremont Multidistrict Initiative in rural Colorado; Launchpad Philly with Building21 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Purdue Polytechnic Charter High Schools in Indiana; and the Rural Alliance Zone, or RAZ32, in Randolph County, Indiana. These programs differ in structure, geography, governance, and industry focus, yet they point to a common lesson: Work-based learning succeeds when schools and communities work together to build the structures and systems that allow young people to move effectively between classrooms and workplaces.

The programs profiled here show that these models require more than willing schools and employers or motivated students. They depend on bigger system conditions that many states cannot yet offer for schools: state graduation and accountability policies that recognize work-based learning; dedicated funding for costs that traditional school budgets often overlook; flexibility in teacher licensure and staffing; strong employer partnerships; full-time personnel to

manage relationships; and transportation plans that allow students to reach placements. When these conditions are missing, schools must create workarounds. When they are present, career pathways can become permanent systems rather than isolated opportunities. With this in mind, the report concludes with recommendations directed to policymakers, school leaders, employers, and philanthropy.



Students from Fremont Multidistrict Initiative participate in a Summer Institute to learn new skills.

Recommendations

POLICY MAKERS SHOULD:

- Treat work-based learning as a core part of high school design, not as an optional enrichment activity.
- Fund the real costs of earn-and-learn programs.
- Create more opportunities for industry experts to teach or supervise career-related coursework.
- Support regional collaboration.

EMPLOYERS SHOULD:

- View earn-and-learn programs as part of their talent strategy.
- Begin with manageable commitments like job shadows, workplace visits, short projects, or summer internships.
- Strengthen programs by participating early in pathway design.

SCHOOL LEADERS SHOULD:

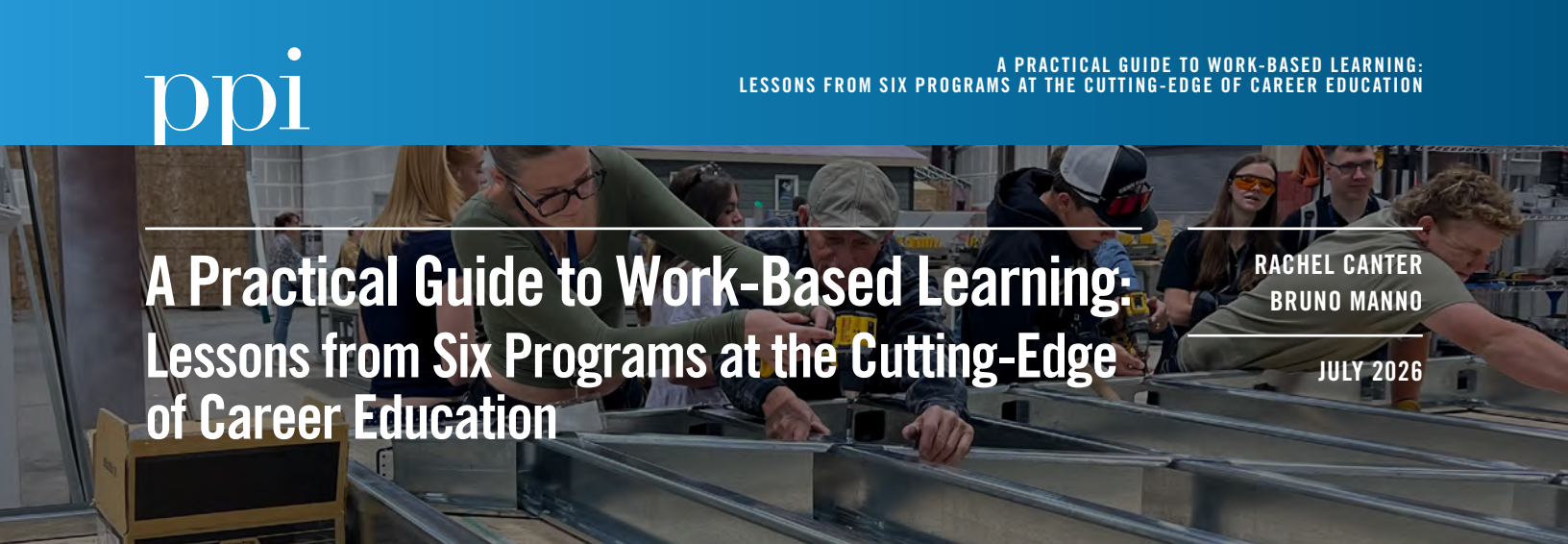
- Recognize that work-based learning is a systems problem, not simply a scheduling problem.
- Design pathways backward from meaningful experiences.
- Start small and focused.

PHILANTHROPY SHOULD:

- Help earn-and-learn programs move from idea to implementation.
- Invest not only in program grants but in systems and structures.
- Convene partners.

The central policy lesson is straightforward. If policymakers, philanthropists, employers, and school leaders want work-based learning to grow, they must build its basic infrastructure. This requires funding for items such as full-time partnership coordinators to engage employers, transportation, student wages or stipends, and practical tools for implementation. It also means

recognizing that the strongest pathways programs are not built by schools alone. They are civic partnerships that connect education systems, workforce agencies, local employers, higher education institutions, and community organizations around a shared goal: helping young people graduate with direction, experience, and options.



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INTRODUCTION

The old binary question about what a young person will do after high school — college or a job? — has become too narrow for the world that young people now face. Many students still benefit enormously from college and should pursue it. But the path from school to adulthood is no longer as linear as it once seemed. Employers increasingly expect prior experience, “durable” skills,² and evidence of readiness. Families want young people to have options that are practical, affordable, and connected to real opportunity.

Career education programs that include work-based learning experiences respond to this reality by bringing school and work closer together. They allow students to learn in classrooms and workplaces, earn wages or stipends, build professional habits, and graduate with clearer signals of what they know and can do. In this sense, they are part of a broader movement toward opportunity pluralism.

This report argues that high-quality work-based learning is not chiefly a matter of getting more employers to participate or encouraging more schools to innovate. It’s an infrastructure challenge. The strongest programs depend on policies, funding streams, flexible staffing, employer partnerships, transportation systems, and full-time coordinators that make it possible for students to move between school and work without falling through the cracks.

This report does not argue that every student should choose a career pathway early, that college is less important, or that workplace learning should replace academic preparation. It argues that students should have more structured ways to connect academic learning, career exploration, postsecondary preparation, and real work experience before they leave high school.

Between October 2025 and February 2026, we interviewed leaders at six career education programs nationwide, including ones operated by both charter and traditional public schools. We generated an initial list of potential subjects based on our prior experience in the field, digging into published reports, talking to national experts, and seeking recommendations from colleagues. From this broader list, we began contacting schools and completed six interviews. Since this research was qualitative in nature, we sought to learn more about particularly innovative models operating across different school types and locations.



Fremont Multidistrict Initiative students participate in field work in a creek.

Our final list included the following model types:

- **Intermediaries** are nonprofits created to serve as connectors between high schools and area employers to establish job placements for students. These nonprofits are governed collaboratively, usually by the schools in their program, but sometimes with board positions for anchor employers or higher education partners.
- **Career and technical education (CTE) dedicated schools** are full-time high schools created to provide CTE pathways for every student.
- **Early college/dual enrollment** schools enable students to earn a high school diploma while accumulating credits towards an associate's or bachelor's degree. Dual enrollment schools with a CTE focus often allow students to earn industry-recognized credentials or certifications through their higher education partner.
- **Part-time technical centers** are stand-alone facilities where students receive industry training. Sometimes, technical centers are operated by independent nonprofits, but large districts or consortia of smaller districts may also operate a single technical center for area schools or districts. In this model type, the technical center does not provide any academic coursework, so students must complete that at their home school.

See Table 1 for an overview of the schools and the model types.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWED SCHOOLS

SCHOOL OR ENTITY	MODEL TYPE ³	CHARTER SCHOOL	LOCATION
CAST SCHOOLS	Intermediary	No	San Antonio, TX
CAREER ACADEMY NETWORK OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS (CANOPS)	CTE-dedicated school	Yes	South Bend, IN
FREMONT MULTIDISTRICT INITIATIVE	Intermediary	No	Fremont County, CO (rural area)
LAUNCHPAD PHILLY WITH BUILDING21	Part-time technical center	No	Philadelphia, PA
PURDUE POLYTECHNIC CHARTER HIGH SCHOOLS	Early college/ dual enrollment	Yes	Indianapolis (3 schools) and South Bend (1 school), IN
RURAL ALLIANCE ZONE (RAZ32)	Intermediary	No	Randolph County, IN (rural area)

WHAT DID WE FIND?

While each program we explored was unique, these six cases point to enabling conditions that appeared across most or all of the models. In cases where these enabling conditions did not exist or only partially existed, programs worked to solve the associated challenge, often in innovative ways. (See Table 2 for a summary.)

Recognizing Work-Based Learning in Graduation and Accountability Requirements

One challenge that high schools face is ensuring students who wish to experience work-based learning (WBL) still earn enough credits for graduation. Often, students must fully satisfy graduation requirements based on traditional classroom-based course credits before becoming eligible for WBL, limiting the number of students who can participate within the confines of the school day. Schools are also

focused intensely on what the state measures through its accountability rating system. For high schools, accountability measures often include achievement on state tests as well as other attainment measures such as graduation rates or the percentage of students taking and passing advanced coursework. While states have begun to incorporate CTE measures such as the percentage of students earning industry-recognized credentials, accountability measures often do not include recognition of WBL hours or skills, in part because of the difficulty of measuring so-called “durable” skills, which include interpersonal abilities like collaboration, empathy, and oral communication.

For the schools in our sample, WBL was not an add-on to the end of the high school experience but part of satisfying graduation and accountability requirements. Several schools

discussed the importance of state policies in making this possible. All three programs in Indiana pointed to the work done by the state legislature and state department of education to restructure graduation requirements around a base diploma with “seals” that recognize readiness for post-secondary enrollment, employment, or enlistment. Even students who do not earn a seal must still satisfy requirements for employability and post-secondary readiness.

The state has developed career-related course sequences, including both classroom-based courses and WBL, that allow students to earn credits towards the base diploma and the seals. In fact, work-based learning is required for the enrollment honors plus seal, which is a mark of distinction that qualifies the graduate for automatic admission to all public higher education institutions in Indiana, and the employment honors and honors plus seals, which are marks of distinction that qualify the graduate for state-organized career support and eligibility for some apprenticeships.⁴ This recognition has enabled both traditional and charter schools in Indiana to create local programs with WBL as a goal for all students. The program we interviewed in Colorado, too, described the importance of their state’s graduation requirements, including a “capstone” component⁵ that could be fulfilled by WBL.

The three programs in Indiana and the program in Colorado also noted how state accountability requirements recognizing WBL and CTE generally provide schools the ability to pursue earn-and-learn programs. Schools reported being relieved of feeling torn between maximizing “points” for their state accountability rating and

offering the programming they feel is right for their students.

Supportive graduation and accountability policies also allow schools to schedule the school day differently to accommodate training or WBL that may not fit easily into the time typically allotted for a single classroom-based course. Both Indiana and Colorado schools described being able to assign students to WBL for a half or full day as part of a state-recognized course.

Indiana and Colorado are widely seen as national leaders in redesigning the high school experience to include more focus on CTE. In states where this is not the case, schools and programs must find a workaround. For San Antonio, Texas-based CAST schools, the ability to provide elective course credit for a senior year “practicum” supports the program’s goal of offering WBL, but this course does not serve as a graduation requirement as similar offerings do in Indiana or Colorado.

This is because Texas offers an “endorsement” for students completing career pathways, but no base graduation credit. Since all of the participating CAST schools are CTE-dedicated high schools, student schedules are built starting in the freshman year with a goal of WBL in the senior year in order to make room in a student’s schedule for WBL. However, students who have not yet fulfilled all of their graduation requirements prior to their practicum must complete these alongside WBL. CAST also noted that because Texas does not recognize WBL in the accountability system, they still struggle to showcase the full impact of their school model.



Career Academy Network of Public Schools students with their welding projects.

Our final program, Launchpad Philly with Building21, faces a similar problem to CAST but has a different solution. This program uses out-of-school time in the summer before a student's senior year, after-school time in the senior year, and the year immediately after a student graduates from high school to provide training in information technology.

Some of Launchpad Philly's participants, particularly those from Philadelphia charter schools, receive elective credit for the senior year training. However, most participants must be on

track to complete their graduation requirements and receive school schedules that end at noon (through a "work release" system for seniors with the permission of parents) to allow for travel to Launchpad's program.

Dedicated Government Funding

CTE programs, including WBL experiences, often require more money than states budget in their funding formulas. Common additional expenses include specialized supplies, equipment, or facilities; small class sizes; industry-credentialed staff; transportation; additional program-level

staff or resources; and stipends or wages for students. High schools wanting to increase their WBL offerings may find these costs prohibitive.

All of the programs that we spoke with mentioned dedicated government funding streams that made their work possible. The high schools in our sample rely on state CTE support through their school funding formulas as well as federal resources for their classroom-based costs. But the targeted funding is typically not enough to cover costs associated with student work experiences. State or county workforce development funds can sometimes be allocated to support WBL programs. RAZ32, for example, received start-up funding and a smaller ongoing operational grant from its county government because the program fills a workforce development need.

Indiana has a state work-study program called the Employment Aid Readiness Network⁶ (EARN) that subsidizes the wages of eligible high school and college student interns in experiential learning positions. Employers receive 50% of a student's hourly rate towards their pay. The Indiana schools in our sample spoke of the benefits of this program because it reduces the burden on schools to raise these funds to support student stipends or wages.

Colorado has a similar program called Opportunity Now⁷ that funds work-based learning and is a significant source of support to the program we studied in the state, the Fremont Multidistrict Initiative (FMI). FMI also had its schools certified as Colorado P-TECH schools.⁸ In addition to opening up funding from the federal P-TECH program, this designation gave the FMI partner schools the ability to count



A Career Academy Network of Public Schools student at work.

in their enrollments recently graduated students who are finishing their dual enrollment program with a local higher education partner.

This policy provides each school up to two additional years of per-pupil funding to help cover the costs associated with preparing students before graduation. Although this funding comes after the school incurs the costs for an individual student, as long as the school's dual enrollment population is stable or growing, the school can maintain the program.

CAST schools receive a "bonus allotment" to their per-pupil funding for being innovative models under Texas's Senate Bill 1882. The additional money is flexible, so partner schools can direct it to CAST for programming as well as management costs. The City of San Antonio supports registered apprenticeships through training and matching, but since these registered apprenticeships are only for young adults over

18, CAST asks employers to support paid pre-apprenticeships for younger students that will lead to eligibility for San Antonio's program.

Launchpad Philly pointed to the critical role of the City of Philadelphia's similar Career Connected Learning program⁹ that pays for student internships or training experiences. This funding primarily supports Launchpad's summer program because the available year-round funding is much smaller than the amount in the summer. As a private nonprofit, Launchpad does not qualify for state per-pupil CTE funding, so it has to raise money for most of its programming, bus tickets to get students to its location, and the stipends it provides students during their senior year of the training program. The recent expansion of Pell Grants for workforce development training won't benefit Launchpad because it is not considered an institution of higher education and currently has no formal higher education partner.

Despite more access to government funding than Launchpad, all of the school-based programs reported the need for ongoing philanthropic support to make their programs work. Usually, this is because government funding does not cover the non-classroom-based costs of work-based learning, including expenses like transportation, stipends, or wages for students or program-level staff. The schools we spoke with recognized that being dependent on private fundraising, even for only a portion of their budget, was not an ideal situation, as philanthropy is much less stable than government funding. They were all seeking ways to reduce their dependence on philanthropy, but this remains an ongoing challenge.

Flexibility from Teacher Licensure Rules

For nearly all classroom- or lab-based courses, high schools have to comply with state teacher licensure rules. This can make it difficult for schools to hire the specialized staff necessary for industry-recognized credentialing or certification courses or to award credit for off-site job experiences. Qualified personnel may have the necessary credentials for a job in the industry but not have a state teaching license. Licensure challenges can be particularly large at small schools, which routinely require teachers to teach multiple courses and may need a teacher with multiple certifications or endorsements to offer an elective course, which career and technical education courses often are. As a result, schools may forgo offering an in-demand course simply because they cannot afford to staff it.

Charter schools frequently have flexibility from both state teacher licensure and collective bargaining rules. This was the most important source of flexibility that both charters in our sample said made it easier for them to operate WBL and CTE programs (although these schools still reported less leeway than others believe).¹⁰ This resonated with Launchpad Philly's experience.

Though its out-of-school model helped Launchpad mostly side-step this issue, its lack of state-licensed teaching staff is the primary reason that students enrolled in traditional district schools do not get credit for Launchpad's senior year training experience, whereas charter school students usually do. Only Pennsylvania charter schools, using their exemption from licensure rules, could give credit for the course with a Launchpad staff member as the teacher of record.

State policy can be a significant support to traditional public schools as well: the Indiana-based RAZ32 pointed to Indiana's "workplace specialist" certification that allows industry professionals to earn a teaching license more easily for CTE high school courses. This has allowed the program to find appropriate staff, even in a rural area. Traditional district schools in other states have to work harder to solve staffing problems.

In rural Fremont County, Colorado, the schools in FMI share courses across campuses so that they can reduce the number of specialized staff they need to hire. At other times, a school has sent a teacher to another campus to help relieve unexpected demand for a course. They have also paid teachers to get a master's degree to qualify as adjuncts at the local community college partner for dual enrollment courses. FMI is the first group of districts in the state to create a special pay scale for their CTE teachers to offer them industry-competitive wages for hard-to-staff positions. This required negotiation with the local collective bargaining unit, but now that the program is showing success, the state is interested in how to enable this model elsewhere.

FMI reported that they have to take the approach of allowing students to sign up for the courses they need to fulfill their pathway program and then figure out how to fit their teaching staff into the licensure requirements for those courses. It means teachers at FMI schools must often teach multiple courses, and they look for teachers with that licensure flexibility. So far, the state has only granted licensure flexibility statewide for physical education courses. FMI noted that if its schools were charters, it would be exempt from these rules in Colorado.

Partnerships between Schools and Employers

The most important condition for WBL is the availability of appropriate student job placements within a reasonable distance of the school. The programs we spoke to identified finding placements as both the most important condition for WBL and the biggest challenge. Several schools stated that they had more students interested in WBL than spots available because there are not enough employers willing or able to employ a high school student.

This may seem like a contradiction because many of the programs we spoke with noted that industries in their area often say they need more trained workers. However, employers do not always feel prepared to collaborate with high school students, who may require more supervision as legal minors than high school graduates or other young adults. Schools also noted that many employers tell them that liability insurance or Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations are a barrier due to the age of high school students.



Students from Fremont Multidistrict Initiative measuring a project.

Schools that started with industry or higher education partnerships from the beginning have had a smoother path to establishing job placements for students. Over time, some of these schools have recruited new partners based on their success with the initial group of employers. FMI now has more demand for students from its partners than students available, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Most programs reported that not all students can participate in WBL because there are not enough placements. Schools often must prioritize students based on readiness for WBL. To some extent, they must do this anyway, as not all students are prepared for off-site placements even when they have finished the course sequence. As one school told us, it can hurt the whole model if an employer has a bad experience with a student. This is in part why

many schools spend the years leading up to the junior or senior year exposing students to workplaces and giving them job shadowing or other short opportunities so that the school can feel confident in student readiness.

Quality control matters because not every workplace experience is automatically educational. Strong programs use written partnership agreements, clear learning plans, mentor expectations, student feedback, and age-appropriate tasks to ensure that placements are structured learning experiences rather than low-level labor. These safeguards also help address a common concern about career education: that it could steer students too narrowly or too early. The best programs preserve options by connecting workplace learning to academic credit, credentials, college pathways, and future advancement.



Students from Fremont Multidistrict Initiative practice using high-powered hoses.

We spoke with two programs, CANOPS and RAZ-32, with a creative solution to dealing with the lack of placements: building a school-based enterprise. When the school is the employer, the program doesn't face the same insurance and transportation hurdles. At CANOPS, the school-based enterprise has been so successful that it now supports both its operating costs and stipends for students who participate. However, the drawback is that it only aligns with one pathway, meaning that students in other pathways may still struggle to find a placement. RAZ-32 has multiple school-based enterprises, which allow students in smaller pathways to experience work-based learning.

Full-Time Personnel Managing Partnerships

Collaborating with multiple employers as well as higher education partners is a full-time job. Each program we spoke with highlighted the importance of a full-time staff person dedicated to managing partnerships. As programs scale to include more students and more employers, they may need more than one person serving in this role.

Small schools or districts, which may struggle to fund each position in their budgets, may find it difficult to dedicate resources to a full-time partnership coordinator. Schools and districts in our sample overcame this challenge by forming the collaborations of FMI, CAST, and RAZ32, reaching enough scale that they could afford full-time staff to manage partnerships. Schools within all three programs set aside some of their state or local funding to support their intermediary, which hires the partnership coordinators. Texas's Senate Bill 1882 provided the legal structure for CAST to form and receive funding directly from its partner schools. FMI and RAZ32 have had to be trailblazers in

their states and seek changes in law to allow collaborations like theirs to be recipients of funding and flexibility.

Both of the charters in our sample, as well as Launchpad Philly, discussed the need to raise additional funds for their coordinator positions. Regardless of program type, though, the interviewees found these people so invaluable to the program that they felt it was a necessary condition for success despite any need for additional fundraising.

The coordinators' most important duty is recruiting employers and developing the partnership agreement, which is a formal document describing the responsibilities of each party, any compensation provided to students, and any other important details. However, coordinators are also the lead in resolving problems that arise, as well as helping students learn about opportunities in the program. They must maintain great relationships with both employers and the community for the success of the program. Especially in the rural areas, coordinators who grew up in the community and are highly visible are best.

Program-Provided Transportation

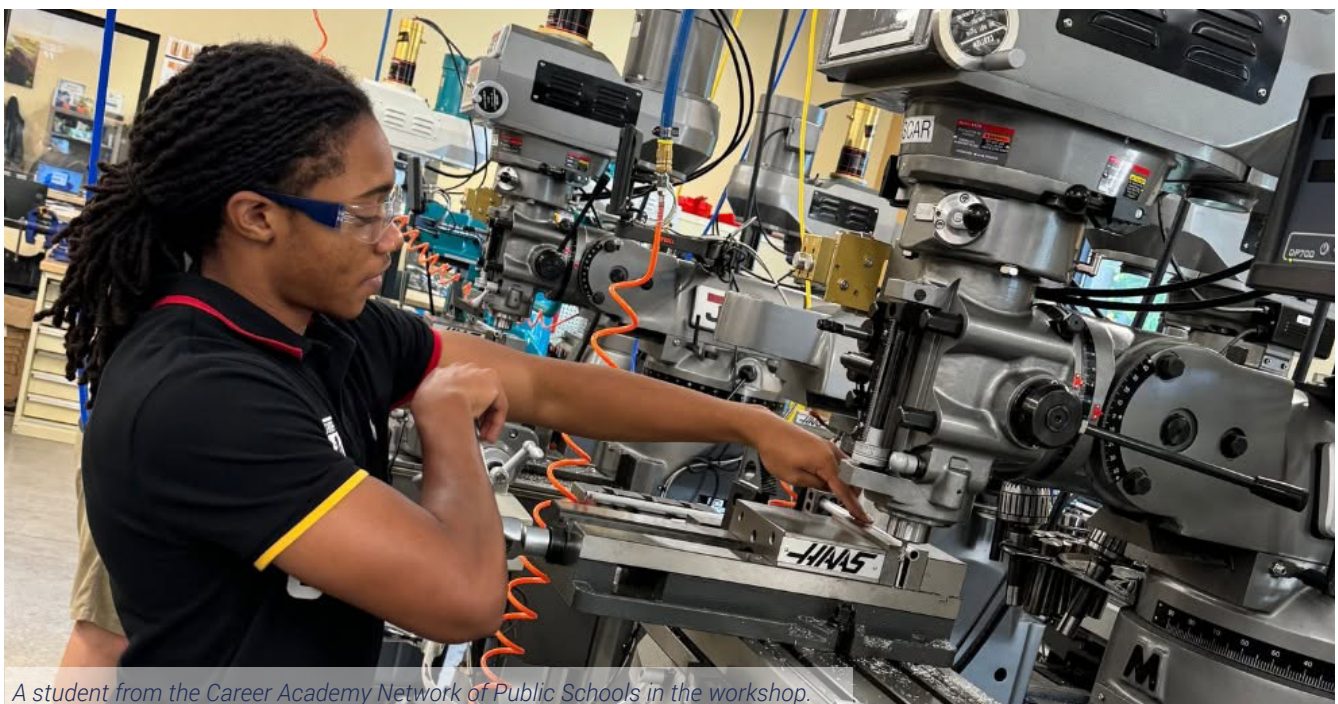
Because work-based learning is rarely on the same campus as a high school, programs have to consider how students will travel to and from their employer. This is an especially thorny problem for schools in rural areas where public transportation is not available. Few employers have the scale or incentive to develop their own transportation system, as adults are required to get to work regardless of where they live. As a result, many schools require students to find their own transportation, which can create a barrier for many.

This is also a question of access and fairness. Work-based learning should not depend on whether a student has a parent or guardian who can drive them to a job, a relative who knows an employer, or a family budget that allows them to work without pay. Programs that provide transportation, stipends, coaching, and coordinated employer access are not simply solving logistical problems. They are helping ensure that work-based learning expands opportunity rather than reproducing existing advantages.

The schools we interviewed talked about the need to develop transportation plans alongside employer placements. RAZ32 has used some of its county government grant for transportation, whereas CAST utilizes school district buses to run routes to and from high schools and employers. Launchpad Philly raises money for bus tickets so that students can use public transportation in Philadelphia, an option not available for the rural programs we spoke with.

Regardless of location, though, most programs discussed how transportation can create a barrier since students may still need to figure out how to reach a job placement, and not all students have a driver's license or a vehicle.

Across the six programs, several conditions appear especially foundational. Schools need state policy that creates time and credit for work-based learning; dedicated funding for costs that regular school budgets rarely cover; and full-time coordination to manage employer partnerships, student preparation, and logistics. Transportation, staffing flexibility, and employer capacity are also essential, but policy recognition, funding, and coordination often determine whether work-based learning can move from a promising example to a lasting system.



A student from the Career Academy Network of Public Schools in the workshop.

TABLE 2. ENABLING CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES

ENABLING CONDITION	CHALLENGE
Graduation requirements and accountability policies recognizing WBL	Ensuring credits for graduation while making time for WBL SOLUTION: Summer program connected to post-graduate program
Dedicated government funding	Philanthropy dependent
Flexibility from teacher licensure rules	Finding qualified staff SOLUTION: Out-of-school model
Partnerships between schools and industry • Buy-in from planning stages • Higher ed partners	Not enough work-based learning spaces for interested students • Insurance • Industry fit SOLUTION: School-based enterprise
Full-time personnel dedicated to maintaining partnerships • Partnership agreement	Limited capacity of school staff SOLUTION: Collaboration across districts for scale
Program-provided transportation	Student-dependent transportation



A CAST student in the field instructing a young student.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers should treat work-based learning as a core part of high school design, not as an optional enrichment activity.

The first step is to ensure that graduation requirements and accountability systems recognize high-quality work-based learning. If students can earn credit for supervised, standards-aligned workplace experiences, schools have more flexibility to build schedules that include internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training. States should also consider accountability measures that recognize meaningful work-based learning hours, industry credentials, and demonstrated employability skills.

Policymakers should fund the real costs of earn-and-learn programs.

Traditional school funding formulas rarely cover all of the additional costs associated with work-based learning, including transportation to employers, student wages or stipends, and partnership coordinators. State CTE funds, workforce development dollars, youth employment programs funding, and local economic development funds should be easier to combine for these purposes. Investments in coordination and logistics can build sustainability.

Policymakers should create more opportunities for industry experts to teach or supervise career-related coursework.

Teacher licensure rules are important, but they should not prevent schools from offering high-demand pathways simply because qualified industry professionals lack traditional teaching credentials. States can create workplace specialist licenses, adjunct teaching pathways,

or supervised co-teaching models that protect quality while expanding capacity.

Policymakers should support regional collaboration.

Many individual schools, especially small and rural schools, cannot build enough employer partnerships on their own. Intermediaries and multi-district collaborations can help schools reach sufficient scale to afford programs by sharing staff, equipment, and the burden of coordinating placements. Public policy should make these collaborations easier to fund and govern.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

School leaders should begin by recognizing that work-based learning is a systems problem, not simply a scheduling problem.

Successful earn-and-learn programs require intentional design across coursework, transportation, staffing, and employer partnerships. Employer relationships cannot be managed as an extra duty layered on already busy teachers or counselors, so schools should designate a person or team of people responsible for coordination. A dedicated coordinator can recruit partners, prepare students, troubleshoot problems, maintain agreements, and ensure that placements remain high quality.

School leaders should design pathways backward from meaningful experiences.

Students need time to explore careers, build foundational skills, practice professional norms, and then move into higher-stakes placements. This requires thinking of WBL as the culmination of a program completed over years instead of an add-on to a senior's schedule. Schools must

build a sequence of courses and experiences from middle school or high school entry that prepares students to be ready for an in-depth career experience.

School leaders should start small and focused.

Schools often struggle to find enough placements to meet student demand, but trying to launch too many pathways at once can dilute quality and strain staff. A smaller number of pathways aligned to real employer demand, strong partners, and credentials of value is more likely to succeed. As trust and capacity grow, schools can expand to new employers and new industries.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDUSTRY

Employers should view earn-and-learn programs as part of their talent strategy.

High school students require supervision, coaching, and clear expectations, but they can also become an important part of a long-term workforce pipeline when programs are well structured.

Employers can begin with manageable commitments like job shadows, workplace visits, short projects, or summer internships.

Over time, these can grow into paid internships, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, or structured on-the-job training. Employers should collaborate with schools to identify tasks that are age-appropriate, legally permissible, and genuinely useful. They should also provide mentors who understand that feedback, reliability, and professional norms are part of what students are learning.

Employers can strengthen programs by participating early in pathway design.

When industry partners help shape curricula, credentials, and readiness expectations, students are more likely to gain skills that matter in the labor market. Employer feedback also helps schools avoid offering credentials or experiences that look impressive on paper but carry little value in hiring or advancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPISTS

Philanthropy can help earn-and-learn programs move from idea to implementation.

Funders are especially useful in the early stages, when schools and communities need flexible capital to design programs, hire coordinators, build employer relationships, and subsidize transportation or stipend models before public funding catches up.

Philanthropy can invest not only in program grants but in systems and structures.

Funders can support partnership coordinators, regional intermediaries, transportation planning, and practical tools such as model agreements, mentor guides, readiness rubrics, and simple data dashboards. These investments reduce duplication and help communities build systems that can later be sustained with public dollars.

Philanthropy can also convene.

Career education programs, as we describe here, require schools, employers, higher education institutions, and civic leaders to work together. Funders can create neutral spaces where these groups align around shared goals and practical implementation. Philanthropy's goal should be to jumpstart programs by helping communities build architecture that eventually becomes part of the public education and workforce system.

CONCLUSION

Career education programs offer a practical response to one of the central challenges facing young people: How to move from school to adulthood with direction, experience, and credible options. These programs do not ask schools to abandon academics, but rather give academic learning purpose and context. They do not force students to choose prematurely between college and career. They help students see how education, work, and further training can connect.

A major lesson from these six programs is that work-based learning does not happen by accident. It depends on enabling conditions: supportive graduation and accountability policies, dedicated funding, staffing flexibility, employer partnerships, full-time coordination, and transportation.

These six programs also show that high-quality work-based learning is possible in very different settings. It can work in charter schools or traditional public schools and in cities or rural counties. It can also operate through intermediaries, technical centers, early college

models, or dedicated CTE schools. Finally, across these examples, we found that career pathways depend on both enabling conditions and disciplined execution. Policymakers need to remove barriers and fund infrastructure. School leaders need to develop and staff programs that intentionally sequence classroom-based coursework and career exposure throughout a student's high school career in order to prepare students for a meaningful work-based learning experience before graduation. Employers need to participate as co-designers. Communities need people who can connect institutions, solve practical problems, and build trust over time. Philanthropy can help reduce the risk of early efforts and build capacity.

If these pieces come together, work-based career education programs can become more than promising examples. They can become a normal part of the high school experience. And when that happens, more students will leave high school not only with a diploma, but with a bridge to adulthood. That is the promise of opportunity pluralism in practice: many credible paths, built deliberately, so young people can move forward with direction, dignity, and choice.



CAST students participating in group work in the classroom.

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ABOUT THE REINVENTING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS PROJECT

The **Reinventing America's Schools Project** seeks to refocus national leadership around proven strategies to improve public schools and educational achievement. We believe that American public schools must prepare children academically to be successful adults and citizens; families should have a voice in their child's education, including a choice within the public system to find a school that best fits their child's needs; and, though education is the province of the states, the federal government must protect the promise that every child will have access to a quality public education.

ABOUT THE WHAT WORKS LAB

The **What Works Lab** (WWL) gathers evidence on the effectiveness of programs that create education and training career pathways to jobs and opportunities for students and workers. This information helps policymakers, practitioners, employers, and other stakeholders foster continuous learning and enhance the effectiveness of career pathways programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Progressive Policy Institute's "A Practical Guide to Work-Based Learning: Lessons from Six Programs at the Cutting-edge of Career Education" was produced by **Rachel Canter** and **Bruno Manno**. The authors would like to thank PPI Fellows **Mia Gartner** and **Olivia Zaft** for assisting with the School Reports. We would also like to thank PPI Fellow **Thomas Abell** for his citation work. We would like to thank the administrators of each school who took the time to interview, revise, and provide data that made this publication possible:

Nicole Amri, CAST School Network
Jennifer Maestas, CAST School Network
Eddie Rodriguez, CAST School Network
Jeanne Russell, CAST School Network
Cory Bess, Purdue Polytechnic High School
NaTanza Bratcher, Purdue Polytechnic High School
Krista Primrose, Purdue Polytechnic High School
Keeanna Warren, Purdue Polytechnic High School
Dannyelle Austin, Launchpad Philly with Building21
Nick Imparato, Launchpad Philly with Building21
Neal Adams, Rural Alliance Zone 32
Amanda Cornelius, Fremont Multidistrict Initiative
Bill Summers, Fremont Multidistrict Initiative
David Ebersol, Career Academy Network of Public Schools
Jeremy Lugbill, Career Academy Network of Public Schools
Andrew Piggott, Career Academy Network of Public Schools
Jamison White, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
Alyssa Morton, Empower Schools

Finally, we would like to thank the individuals who edited and copy-edited this piece, **Jordan Weissman** and **Alyssa Brown-Ruiz**, respectively.

All photos included in this report were provided to PPI from CAST School Network, Purdue Polytechnic High School, Launchpad Philly with Building21, Rural Alliance Zone 32, Fremont Multidistrict Initiative, and the Career Academy Network of Public Schools.

Appendix

PROGRAM: CAREER ACADEMY NETWORK OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS (CANOPS)

Location: South Bend, Indiana

Model: *CTE-dedicated schools.* The Career Academy Network of Public Schools (CANOPS) is a network of tuition-free, career and technical education-focused public charter schools. It is chartered by the Indiana Charter School Board (ICSB), which reviews, approves, and oversees charter schools throughout Indiana.

Charter School Status: Yes

Students Served: CANOPS

encompasses five schools in South Bend, Indiana, as of the 2024-2025 school year: Career Academy Middle school (approximately 415 students), Career Academy High School (approximately 450 students), Success Academy (elementary school, 610 students), the Portage School of Leaders (high school, 61 students), and Success Academy at Boys and Girls Club (elementary school, 113 students). With all five schools combined and their anticipated growth in the fall, they expect to serve just under 2,000 students in fall 2026. CANOPS' student body is majority-minority, with 40% Black students, 16% Hispanic students, and 12% students of other racial minorities. Approximately 70 percent of their students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of federal poverty status.

Pathways Offered: The Career Academy High School offers pathways in engineering, welding technology, entrepreneurship, social and community service, education, exercise science, biomedical science, and AI/machine learning. The Portage School of Leaders offers pathways in cybersecurity and information assurance, education, engineering, healthcare, marketing and sales, and precision machining.



A student uses mechanical equipment in the workshop.

Work-based learning model: Students at CANOPS high schools begin exploring career and college opportunities as freshmen by enrolling in two Next Level Programs of Study career pathways. During their freshman year, students take the introductory "Principles" course in each pathway, allowing them to gain exposure to multiple career fields. This helps students discover their strengths, interests, and potential career goals before committing to a specific pathway. Beginning in their sophomore year, students select the career pathway that best aligns with their interests and continue taking pathway-specific coursework through their senior year. CANOPS organizes work-based learning placements for as many students as possible and leverages its school-based enterprise for additional placements. Around 60 of their students have been placed with between 50 and 75 employers. CANOPS is currently working to partner with Beacon Health to create a registered apprenticeship for healthcare pathway students at their local hospital, which will open more and more stable, work-based learning opportunities.

Credentials/college credit: CANOPS offers dual credit and dual enrollment opportunities to students with their flagship partner Ivy Tech Community College,¹¹ which is the largest single-accredited community college in the nation. Additionally, pathway coursework is designed to lead to industry-recognized credentials of value, giving students tangible evidence of their skills and preparing them for immediate employment, advanced training, apprenticeships, military service, or postsecondary education. Of the approximately 115 seniors graduating from CANOPS schools this year, 25 have earned an associate's degree while in high school. Students can also earn both high school and college credits through courses that have been designated as applicable for credit by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.¹² CANOPS engages in a rigorous faculty credentialing process with its postsecondary partners to ensure the quality of the instruction and curriculum is at a college level.

Key partners: CANOPS maintains partnerships with community organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Northern Indiana Corridor, which helped grow the network's high school career pathways; Indiana colleges; and the Garatoni-Smith Family Foundation, whose Trustee, Larry Garatoni, is the Board President of CANOPS. The Portage School of Leaders also recently announced a partnership with Purdue Polytechnic High School in South Bend, an early college/dual enrollment school, which was also interviewed for this report.

Transportation: Transportation is provided for students between CANOPS schools in the mornings and afternoons using their five buses. However, parents pick up and drop off their students for school each day. Students in work-based learning experiences off campus must find their own transportation to their placement. Public charter schools in Indiana do not equitably receive the same local property tax revenue, which is typically used for operations like transportation, as traditional public schools receive. Due to recent legislation aimed at addressing transportation barriers, CANOPS applied for and was selected to be one of three school systems in Indiana to initiate a transportation pilot.¹³

Student supports: As a key partner to CANOPS, the Garatoni-Smith Family Foundation has both supported capital projects (due to state funding gaps) and funded scholarships¹⁴ for students for their post-high school education.

Funding sources: The Career Academy Network of Public Schools receives state and federal per-pupil dollars, but public charter schools in Indiana do not receive all of the same local education dollars as traditional public schools. Recent legislative efforts have begun to change the funding formulas to provide equity through property tax sharing. However, currently, CANOPS must fundraise and apply for specialized government grants to account for its lower revenue and higher program costs. Recently, the network has received a 2022 Explore, Engage, and Experience (3E) Grant and a 2023 School Improvement Grant (SIG) from the Indiana Department of Education, as well as private funding from the Garatoni-Smith Family Foundation, associated with its Board Chair, Larry Garatoni. CANOPS students also benefit from the Employment Aid Readiness Network (EARN), a state work-study program that funds the earnings of qualifying student interns by providing employers with 50% of a student's hourly rate towards their pay.

Known Results: According to the network's Annual Performance Reports from the Indiana Department of Education, as of 2023, 83.5% of Career Academy's eighth-grade students earned high school credit throughout their middle school years. Career Academy High School reports that 86% of its students have completed college and career coursework, 20.8% of its students have obtained high-quality college and career credentials, and 72.3% of its graduates have achieved one or more of the following Indiana diploma designations: Core 40, Academic Honors, Technical Honors, Academic and Technical Honors, or International Baccalaureate. Career Academy boasts a 97.0% graduation rate.

PROGRAM: CAST SCHOOL NETWORK

Location: San Antonio, Texas

Model: Intermediary. CAST is a network of tuition-free, industry-led, career-themed public schools developed in partnership with local school districts and employers. It partners with four public school districts and operates as a nonprofit network supporting multiple campuses.

Charter School Status: No

Students Served: CAST is a network of seven schools in San Antonio. Campuses include Advanced Learning Academy, CAST Imagine, CAST Lead, CAST Med, CAST STEM, CAST Teach, and CAST Tech. Grades served vary by campus, including middle school, high school, and the Advanced Learning Academy's broader PK–12/4–12 configuration. The students are majority-minority, with Hispanic students representing over 75% of total participating students. Each school has over 60% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, which is a measure of federal poverty status.

Pathways Offered: CAST campuses are organized around regional industry themes. CAST Tech focuses on technology, business, cybersecurity, UX design, entrepreneurship, and related fields. CAST STEM focuses on engineering, advanced manufacturing, energy and power, business, drone piloting, and global logistics. CAST Med focuses on medicine, nursing, biomedical engineering, public health, and medical research. CAST Lead focuses on business, retail, hospitality, agribusiness, and e-commerce. CAST Teach focuses on education and preparing future teachers.

Work-based learning model: Students work on real-world projects, engage with mentors and industry professionals, and participate in internships or practicum-style experiences. CAST's model emphasizes exposure to high-wage, fast-growth jobs and places schools near industry clusters, such as CAST Tech near downtown San Antonio's technology district and CAST STEM near Toyota manufacturing and Port San Antonio.



Students from the CAST Tech program during instruction.

Credentials/college credit: CAST schools provide various levels of credentials and college credit opportunities, depending on the academy they attend. For example, CAST Lead provides students with access to transferable college credits and industry-recognized certificates. CAST Med offers AP and dual-credit courses, as well as opportunities for professional certifications as Medical Assistant, Phlebotomy Technician, or Biotechnician Assistant. CAST Tech allows students to earn up to two years of college credit, with long-term projects being a highlighted point. CAST Teach allows students to obtain the Educational Aid Level 1 certification. CAST STEM provides students with the opportunity to obtain an Associate's degree. Lastly, the Advanced Learning Academy provides a Certification in Adobe Creative Cloud.

Key partners: CAST works with four public school districts (San Antonio Independent School District, Southwest Independent School District, East Central Independent School District, and Northside Independent School District), higher education institutions (San Antonio College and Palo Alto College), and local employers from target industries. Specific partners or supporters include the Charles Butt Foundation, USAA, Frost Bank, Rackspace, Geekdom, CPS Energy, Toyota, Zachry, HOLT CAT, UT Health, UTSA, Palo Alto College, and the University of the Incarnate Word's medical campus.

Transportation: CAST offers free transportation to most students through district bus partnerships; however, once students can drive, they can provide their own transportation if they have the means of doing so.

Funding sources: CAST is a nonprofit network and notes consistent support from the Charles Butt Foundation and other local and national philanthropies. As public schools, the CAST partner schools receive school district funding, which relies on local property taxes, state education formulas, and federal grants. Due to their innovative teaching methods, the schools also receive a flexible "bonus allotment" under Texas law, Senate Bill 1882, which they can utilize for programming and CAST management costs. This law also provided the legal structure for CAST to form and receive funding directly from partner schools.

Known results: CAST Tech and CAST STEM have each earned an A rating from the Texas Education Agency, while CAST Med has earned a B. CAST Med reports graduates attending top universities, earning scholarships, and interning at institutions such as UT Health and the San Antonio Biotechnology Research Center. Nearly 90% of CAST students meet Texas' readiness standards for higher education, and approximately 1 in 3 students gain industry experience through internships in the program.

PROGRAM: FREMONT MULTIDISTRICT INITIATIVE

Location: Fremont County, Colorado

Model: *Intermediary*. The Fremont Multidistrict Initiative (FMI) is a partnership among Fremont County school districts (Canon City High School, Florence Jr./Sr. High School, and Cotopaxi Jr./Sr. High School) and Pueblo Community College, Fremont Campus, designed to expand access to shared college and career pathways for rural students. FMI coordinates shared programming, instructors, certifications, and pathway opportunities across multiple districts to increase educational access and workforce preparation for students throughout the region.



Students from Fremont Multidistrict Initiative laying concrete.

Charter School Status: No

Students Served: FMI is designed to serve approximately 1,500 high school students across rural Fremont County school districts. Among their shared course students, the enrollment in these programs is predominantly White and majority female. The socioeconomic divide is notable; every Hispanic and Asian student in the program qualifies for free and reduced lunch, in comparison to only a third of the white students.

Pathways Offered: Career pathways align with regional workforce and postsecondary needs. There are four main pathways that students can choose from: Agriculture & Environmental, Computer Information Systems, Health Sciences, and Education.

Work-based learning model: Students can place a heavy focus on dual enrollment, allowing 20% of students to enroll in associate degree programs. FMI also offers a program that supplies a high rate of industry-recognized credentials and emphasizes a capstone program that teaches and assesses each student. All enrolled students also do a 60-hour internship with one of 250 employers; many students opt to do more than one.

Credentials/college credit: FMI places strong emphasis on industry certifications and college-connected pathways through its partnership with Pueblo Community College, Fremont Campus. As of Fall 2024, students have access to eight industry certifications and 21 shared courses across partner schools. The partnership structure provides opportunities for dual enrollment, particularly through the P-TECH program.

Key partners: The initiative is built to foster regional cooperation among the Fremont County school districts and Pueblo Community College, Fremont Campus. The other key partners include the 35 companies that host student interns.

Transportation: Transportation is offered by FMI for courses that are on site. Each district owns a van purchased by FMI used to transport students to shared courses, internships, and FMI programming. Drivers are paid by FMI grant funding; districts assume maintenance costs, insurance, and gas, etc. Students can also provide their own transportation if desired. Routes between districts are planned at the beginning of each semester.

Student support: There is an intense focus on advising as students decide what program they are looking to pursue. Each internship is matched based on the interests of both the students and the companies. The advisory curriculum is designed to assist students in preparation for work-based learning. Specifically, they offer a regional master scheduling effort to align on course offerings to ensure they are offering courses that more students can access.

Funding Sources: FMI has certified its schools as Colorado P-TECH schools, which allows students to graduate with both a high school diploma and an industry-recognized associate's degree. Because of this distinction, the initiative can receive up to two more years of per-pupil funding post-graduation for an enrolled student. The initiative is also funded through Opportunity NOW, a statewide grant in Colorado to connect Coloradans with in-demand jobs. The Executive Director position is 100% grant funded. They have also been awarded a Congressionally Directed Spending grant for Colorado that will end in June 2028.

Known Results: FMI has been able to fund 75 internships as of the 2023-2024 school year and have reached 1,500 students across 4 schools, with a 200% increase in cross-district access over the last several years. Last school year, FMI placed over 300 students in internships. Students at one high school, Canon City High School, have obtained nearly \$10,000 in scholarships per year, with over 1,000 internships completed since 2021.

PROGRAM: PURDUE POLYTECHNIC HIGH SCHOOLS (PPHS)

Location: Indianapolis and South Bend, Indiana

Model: *Early college/dual enrollment.*

PPHS is a Purdue University-affiliated network of public charter early college high schools. The network operates multiple campuses, including Broad Ripple, Englewood, and PPHS LAB, and combines high school academics with industry partnerships, dual-credit coursework, coaching, and experiential learning. Through partnerships, PPHS connects students with Purdue University, employers, and community organizations.

Charter School Status: Yes

Students Served: PPHS serves around 900 students from grades 9-12. Campuses primarily serve high school students, though PPHS LAB includes earlier-grade programming. The schools were originally designed to expand access to STEM education, college pathways, and career-connected learning for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. The student body is majority-minority and is 42% Black, 26% Hispanic, and 31% White, with other races accounting for approximately 1%. About 55% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of federal poverty status.

Pathways Offered: Students can take courses in engineering, technology, entrepreneurship, innovation, design, advanced manufacturing, computer science, and interdisciplinary STEM learning; however, formal pathways are not offered.

Work-based learning model: PPHS integrates project-based learning, internships, job shadowing, mentorship, and industry-connected projects throughout the student experience. Students participate in internships and career exploration experiences aligned with their interests and pathways. Students' day-to-day experiences depend on the campus they attend. PPHS Lab students experience lower stimulation, calm environments, and more support, while the Broad Ripple campus is more centered on students' goals and specific interests.



Students investigating computer hard drives.

Credentials/college credit: PPHS strongly emphasizes dual credit, Advanced Placement coursework, industry-recognized credentials, and college pathways. The schools were created in partnership with Purdue University, and PPHS promotes a “Pathway to Purdue” model that gives students exposure to Purdue faculty, campus experiences, college-level coursework, and postsecondary advising.

Key partners: Major partners include Purdue University, STEM-focused industries, local employers, nonprofits, and community organizations in proximity to the schools. PPHS has more than 27 industry partnerships and an extensive collaboration with Purdue faculty and university programs.

Transportation: PPHS works with its local transportation partners to allow students to get to and from school; the options vary by campus and are not always available for students traveling to and from internships.

Student supports: Each student is assigned a specific advisory coach who assists in goal setting and building strong relationships in the community. Students are also provided with mentors who support their learning more informally.

Funding sources: As a public charter school, PPHS operates through state, local, and federal per-pupil funding combined with philanthropic fundraising and university-supported partnerships.

Known Results: PPHS reports more than 25 industry partnerships and positions itself as a statewide innovative model for career-connected STEM education. Students are able to utilize skills from their time at PPHS to prepare for their future endeavors, whether they may be space exploration, chemical engineering, or computer and information technology.

PROGRAM: RURAL ALLIANCE ZONE (RAZ32)

Location: Randolph County, Indiana

Model: *Intermediary*. RAZ-32 is a partnership among Monroe Central, Randolph Central, and Randolph Eastern school corporations. The initiative pools instructors, programs, transportation, and employer partnerships across rural districts to expand access to career pathways and work-based learning opportunities that individual schools could not sustain independently.

Charter School Status: No

Students Served: RAZ-32 serves juniors and seniors from participating high schools in Randolph County and surrounding areas, including Monroe Central, Winchester, Union City, Randolph Southern, Wapahani, and Northeastern Wayne schools. The students enrolled in the pathways programs are about 79% White and 21% Hispanic across participating schools. About 46% of students enrolled in the program qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of federal poverty status. The program currently serves 63 students, but enrollment totals are rising, as there is expected to be an increase in students by nearly 60%.

Pathways Offered: RAZ-32 organizes pathways across participating host schools based on regional workforce demand, including healthcare, advanced manufacturing, transportation, agriculture, and skilled trades. Current pathways include Precision Agriculture, Early Childhood Education, Medical Assistant/Health Careers (CCMA), Broadcasting & Media Production, Marketing & Sales, Commercial Driver's License (CDL-Class A), Precision Machining, and Welding Technology. The largest pathway is welding with 43% of students, followed by healthcare with 24% of students. The remaining pathways currently have 6 or fewer students each, but together comprise 33% of students in the program, demonstrating the importance of rural collaboration in order to offer such a variety.



Students from RAZ32 planting seeds in the greenhouse.

Work-based learning model: RAZ-32 embeds work-based learning throughout its pathways and offers multiple levels of employer engagement. Students participate in career fairs, workplace tours, job shadows, mentorships, client-connected projects, school-based enterprises, employer-based work placements, and apprenticeships. School-based enterprises include Apache Design, KISS radio station, Falcon Industries, and the Monroe Central Early Learning Center. Eligible second-year pathway students can participate in work-based learning experiences or apprenticeships that may be paid and typically involve 10 to 20 work hours per week. Federally approved registered apprenticeship opportunities currently include medical assistant and early childhood educator pathways, where these students receive training while on the job, work toward earning credentials, and grow a relationship with their potential employer. Students work under formal training plans developed collaboratively by instructors and employers.

Credentials/college credit: RAZ-32 strongly emphasizes dual credit and industry-recognized certifications. More than 70% of pathways lead directly to college credentials. Organizational goals include having 85% of pathway students complete at least three dual-credit courses totaling nine or more credits, and 50% of pathway concentrators earn industry certifications or technical certificates. Programs also prepare students for workforce-recognized credentials in areas such as healthcare, welding, machining, and CDL licensure.

Key partners: Major partners include Monroe Central, Randolph Central, and Randolph Eastern school corporations; Ivy Tech Community College Richmond; Empower Schools; Randolph County Commissioners; Eastern Indiana Works; East Central Educational Service Center; local employers; and regional civic leaders. There is an emphasis on collaboration with healthcare providers, manufacturers, and workforce-development organizations throughout East Central Indiana. Ivy Tech Community College Richmond serves as a dual-credit and postsecondary partner.

Transportation: RAZ-32 provides morning transportation between participating districts and host schools for many programs. Students may need to arrange their own transportation for off-site work-based learning experiences.

Student supports: The model is intentionally designed around student access, local workforce demand, and long-term rural community development. The program provides “Workforce Wednesdays” to allow students to demonstrate durable skills such as communication, professionalism, collaboration, initiative, technical skills, and problem-solving in authentic settings.

Funding sources: As a 501(c)(3), RAZ-32 began with funding through its area educational service center as well as contributions from each participating school. They have also received workforce funding from the county government. For programming, RAZ-32 uses a braided funding model. Depending on the pathway and year, support may include local district contributions, CTE-related funding, grants, employer or community support, postsecondary partnerships, shared staffing, shared facilities, and transportation coordination.

Known Results: RAZ-32 publicly reports ambitious measurable goals tied to enrollment, completion, dual credits, certifications, and work-based learning participation. In the most recent school year, 91.4% of students completed their pathway program, and 92.3% of completers attained pathway concentrator status for their future diploma. Approximately 84% of students earned 9 or more dual credits, while 100% of students enrolled in an Ivy Tech credentialing program earned their certificate. The 2024-25 end-of-year data also recorded 12 employer engagement/student connection activities and 16 students participating in school-based enterprise or school-based work-based learning.

PROGRAM: LAUNCHPAD PHILLY WITH BUILDING21

Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Model: *Part-time technical center.*

Launchpad Philly is a nonprofit organization that connects underserved Philadelphia youth to career pathways in technology and future-ready industries through paid work-based learning, AI-focused skill development, coaching, certifications, and employer partnerships. The organization operates as a technical center rather than a traditional school, partnering with employers, educators, and workforce organizations to support students during the transition from high school into college, training, or employment. The model begins in 11th grade and continues through the first year after high school graduation.



Students in the classroom during a lecture.

Charter School Status: No, but Building21, the parent organization, is an open-admission, competency-based school.

Students Served: Launchpad serves Philadelphia high school students, particularly 11th and 12th graders, as well as recent graduates. The organization specifically focuses on underserved students interested in technology and future-ready careers, including students without previous coding or technical experience. 100% of their students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of federal poverty status, and 85% identify as Black or Brown. More than 95% come from non-selective district and charter high schools, and they set no academic entrance requirements beyond completion of 11th grade.

Pathways Offered: Launchpad primarily focuses on technology- and AI-related career pathways. Students choose between two pathways - AI Engineering and Entrepreneurial Leadership. The AI Engineering pathway runs from high school into the post-high-school training year and then into paid client work through Launchpad Inc., preparing participants for roles such as AI Solutions Developer, Automation Specialist, and Web Application Developer. The Entrepreneurial Leadership pathway

extends the same model to cross-sector roles in project coordination, operations, and business support, where AI fluency and project management skills matter more than a single technical specialty. Across both pathways, Launchpad keeps participants earning throughout, preparing them not just for a single job offer, but for the stretch of contracts, internships, and project work that defines how early careers actually work today.

Work-based learning model: Launchpad's model centers on paid, applied work-based learning throughout the student experience. Students participate in hands-on technical training, internships, apprenticeships, portfolio-based projects, mentorship, career coaching, and employer-connected learning experiences. Students begin their training in the summer after their junior year, where they build their foundations in AI training, 3D printing, and other affiliated fields. The second stage is during the senior year of students' high school experience, which includes coaching, college courses, and exposure to opportunities. The third stage is when students gain work experience as apprentices and build their professional portfolios.

Credentials/college credit: Every Launchpad participant earns between two and four industry-recognized credentials as a core part of the program. Launchpad 101 students (high school students) in the AI Engineering pathway earn the PCEP (Certified Entry-Level Python Programmer), with cohort pass rates ranging from 70% to 100%, alongside a Generative AI Foundations certification. Entrepreneurial Leadership students earn the CAPM (Certified Associate in Project Management) in place of the PCEP, plus the same Generative AI Foundations credential. LiftOff participants (post-high-school students) earn industry certifications from Anthropic and AWS, alongside a portfolio of deployed AI systems. Launchpad is also in the process of securing third-party college credit recommendations through the National College Credit Recommendation Service.

Key partners: Partners and supporters include Philadelphia School Partnership, William Penn Foundation, Patricia Kind Family Foundation, organizations such as Philadelphia Youth Network, and regional employer partners. Launchpad's partnerships span employers, schools, and workforce organizations across Philadelphia. On the employer side, nearly 20 employer partners - including Accenture, Seer Interactive, CreateAccess, Bentley Systems, HiTouch, AECOM, Nerd Street, PGW, and PECO - provide internships, curriculum input, employer-driven project challenges, and direct hiring. On the school side, Launchpad recruits from more than 30 Philadelphia high schools, including a formal dual enrollment partnership with Mastery Charter Schools that guarantees participation of at least 15 seniors per year.

Transportation: Launchpad covers transportation costs to the program, ensuring that a student's zip code never determines whether they can show up.

Student supports: Due to the nature of Launchpad, students receive significant stipends and paid workplace experiences intended to reduce financial barriers to participation. Beyond earnings, Launchpad covers meals, transportation, professional clothing, and laptops, and provides every participant with one-on-one coaching, career and financial counseling, mock interviews with industry professionals, and connections to social services for those navigating housing instability or family obligations.

Funding sources: Launchpad operates as a nonprofit supported by grants, employer partnerships, and workforce development investments, such as the City of Philadelphia's Career Connected Learning Program, which is tied to youth employment and technology training. Philanthropic supporters include the William Penn Foundation and the Patricia Kind Family Foundation. Launchpad is also actively building earned-revenue streams through two complementary models: Launchpad Inc., its social enterprise arm that performs paid client work for businesses and nonprofits, and a per-pupil revenue partnership with school networks, through which Launchpad receives direct per-student funding in exchange for serving seniors through a formal dual enrollment arrangement.

Known Results: Launchpad highlights student completion of industry certifications, portfolios, internships, and employer-connected projects. Companies are able to hire developers through Launchpad for custom projects, which is overseen by Launchpad staff, allowing students to work on real-world projects with the safety of management staff behind them. For example, a Car Wash Scout for a Real Estate Developer, and a Student Behavior Log for an Educational Software Provider. For Launchpad 101, 97% of graduates are in college, a workforce program, or employment within three months of completing the program. For LiftOff, where the goal is a path to a living wage, Cohort 1 results are early but tracking in the right direction: 92% were in paid work or training at six months post-graduation, with average annualized earnings of roughly \$15,000 — projected to reach nearly \$30,000 by nine months, on a path toward the \$50,000 living-wage target Launchpad holds as its 12-month benchmark. For context, a young Philadelphian with a high school diploma and no college degree earns about \$12,500 a year — making every step of rising earning power the real measure of the program's impact.

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