



A photograph of a man and a woman in a workshop setting. The man, wearing glasses and a dark blue polo shirt, is pointing at a control panel with various buttons and a screen. The woman, also in a dark blue polo shirt, is looking at the panel with interest. The background shows a wooden wall and some equipment.

# Reinventing High Schools: The Importance of Exposing Every Young Person to the World of Work

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## INTRODUCTION

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**It is the end of February in Indianapolis. I arrive at a newly developed building complex that houses Ascend Indiana — a nonprofit intermediary organization that connects Hoosiers to in-demand careers and regional employers to skilled talent, fostering cross-sector partnerships, building capacity, and developing insights that enable system-level change to transform the career trajectory of youth and adults in the community.**

As part of their efforts, Ascend partners with EmployIndy, the local workforce board, to offer the Modern Apprenticeship Program (MAP).<sup>1</sup> MAP is a three-year program designed to prepare Central Indiana high school students for the workforce with paid, hands-on experiences that complement their traditional academic coursework. Apprentices start in their junior year and pursue jobs in growing fields such as business, advanced manufacturing, and IT. Afterward, they can continue to college or jump right into their career.

While visiting Ascend, I had the pleasure of meeting three of these youth apprentices. They all are extremely impressive, going to school full-time while also advancing in their apprenticeship program — with positions working in human resources, talent acquisition, and business management. High school students earning college credits, a wage, and critical job skills; this type of opportunity was not available to me and my peers in high school.

In fact, most young people in our country still don't have access to high-quality career learning experiences like MAP apprentices.

This is a result of our nation's education system over-emphasizing college prep coursework and advising, while career preparation programs are overlooked, under-resourced, and even discouraged by federal and state policy. While we know that college — specifically a bachelor's degree — often leads to higher long-term earnings, most Americans still do not earn degrees,<sup>2</sup> with many forgoing college altogether, and many — 39 million to be exact — enrolling in college but not completing a degree.<sup>3</sup> They are left with student debt and without a credential of value.

This trend is expected to worsen as young people increasingly question the career and financial benefits of traditional higher education. As a result, students aren't attending, or are postponing their college plans altogether, which is apparent in the sharp declines in college enrollment among recent high school graduates.<sup>4</sup> Rather than just focusing on college prep in their academic curriculum, students seem to be looking for ways to infuse career relevance into their education.<sup>5</sup>

Career education does exist in schools today, for example, through our nation's Career and Technical Education (CTE) system. CTE funds most of career learning in K-12 and these programs seek to provide students with academic and technical skills and the guidance needed to make informed career choices. Data shows that CTE concentrators, or students that have completed at least two CTE courses in a pathway, have a 94% high school graduation rate, which is 8% points higher than the national average.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, CTE concentrators are employed full-time at higher rates and earn more than non-concentrators throughout their career. Yet even with promising outcomes, one in four high schools don't offer CTE at all and out of

roughly 15 million public high school students across the country, only 3 million are CTE concentrators.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear the CTE system has its limitations. Funding is a big one. The federal government spends over \$57 billion annually on our nation's secondary schools.<sup>8</sup> This investment does not include the majority of public funds for K-12 which come from the state and local level or the \$122 billion in relief from the American Rescue Plan Act.<sup>9</sup> Of all that, the CTE system receives roughly \$1.3 billion annually for both youth and adult career education.<sup>10</sup> As a result, only \$600 million of total CTE funds goes toward K-12 to support career learning and experiences.

Compared to other public resources for secondary education, that truly is a drop in the bucket. School districts trying to provide career learning opportunities cite insufficient funding as the biggest barrier to offering these options in high school.<sup>11</sup> However, funding constraints are not the only challenge. Inconsistent state support and the stigma that often attaches to career-oriented coursework and its students result in programs of widely varying quality and accessibility. Additionally, logistical hurdles, like recruiting and retaining qualified instructors, inflexible scheduling of programming, and finding willing employers make it especially hard to offer a critical element of CTE: work-based learning.<sup>12</sup>

Work-based learning programs, like MAP in Indianapolis, can include apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training, among other options. These opportunities help young people gain the

knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to achieve strong career outcomes. Work-based learning is beneficial for all young people but can be especially useful for individuals from low-income backgrounds and others who may otherwise not have access to career exposure, educational opportunities, professional networks, and social capital that play a critical role in career success.

The popularity of work-based learning has surged in recent years, with new energy and activity from the public and private sectors. States and locals can now leverage federal CTE dollars for these activities while also including work-based learning as a program quality indicator. While roughly half of states selected work-based learning as a quality indicator for their CTE programs, early data from these efforts demonstrated mixed success, with fewer students than expected accessing high-quality opportunities.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic was a factor in these outcomes, especially for young people in rural and underserved communities that lack an extensive employer base or access to the necessary digital tools to access virtual options.

Faced with these obstacles, it is no wonder schools have continued the outdated approach of focusing on college prep coursework and have generally ignored career education in high schools. However, it can't be ignored any longer. These opportunities are critical for an individual's success after high school – preparing young people for the world of work and providing strong alternatives for those not interested in or unable to access a four-year degree. It is time for our education system to undergo

much-needed reform and finally reinvent high schools.

This brief calls on policymakers to do just that – elevating innovative approaches across the country, like MAP in Indianapolis, that can be replicated and scaled. It also offers policy recommendations, calling on leaders to adopt solutions that: ensure every high school student can participate in high-quality work-based learning, boost public investment, and make these resources more effective and build strong cross-sector partnerships, which are critical for these efforts to succeed. This work is more important now than ever to ensure our nation's education system creates paths to greater economic opportunity and avoids leaving millions of young people behind, especially those who don't go to college.

## MOMENTUM IN THE FIELD

Creative leaders are meeting the moment and making this work happen. These four examples highlight innovative and successful approaches to building out career paths for young people and embedding work-based learning in high schools. While each example offers a different strategy and practice, it demonstrates models that can be replicated and scaled at the federal level and in states across the country.

### Delaware Pathways

When it comes to career pathways, Delaware has long been acknowledged national leader. In 2015, a group of stakeholders led by Governor Jack Markell, including state agencies, local education agencies, business leaders, and philanthropic organizations

joined forces to launch Delaware Pathways.<sup>14</sup> The statewide program offers K-12 students the opportunity to complete a program of study aligned with an in-demand career before they graduate. Each pathway involves a sequence of specialized courses, a work-based learning experience, and the option to earn college credit. The Pathways website also offers career exploration tools that allow students to explore labor market data. This results in students who are better prepared for the future, schools that have resources to help students succeed, and local employers who have a talented pool of homegrown job applicants.

From just 27 students in 2014, there are over 23,000 students enrolled in Delaware Pathways today. Additionally, 89 middle and high schools offer these programs – including all the state’s public districts (both comprehensive and vocational-tech), as well as charter schools and schools for at-risk students. Additionally, in a baseline report published in 2019, 85% of surveyed employers reported they were likely or very likely to hire a student they had employed during an immersive work-based learning experience.<sup>15</sup> Delaware has done well because the state leverages philanthropic and federal resources, including Perkins V and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).<sup>16</sup> It has a comprehensive state plan that represents a partnership between the state’s education and workforce systems to ensure resources are blended effectively with local education agencies, postsecondary institutions, and workforce providers.

### MAP Indiana

MAP is a youth apprenticeship program in which participating juniors and seniors split their day between classes and work – where they are on the job with a local employer – earning roughly \$13 an hour, which matches entry-level jobs in the area. After high school, apprentices stay on for their “13<sup>th</sup> year” – ensuring that young people who don’t continue to college have another year of training while also receiving advising and mentorship support, so they don’t drop out of school and work altogether. To date, MAP has placed 78 apprentices in the first two cohorts, of which more than 90% identify as students of color, 60% as young women, and one-third come from low-income backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, MAP has students placed at 40 employers and counting for their apprenticeship opportunities. While there has been initial success, this work takes extensive resources and staff capacity. Currently, Ascend and EmployIndy are leveraging philanthropic, private, and public dollars, but it still is not enough to accept all MAP applicants. To ensure this program can reach more young people across Indiana, Ascend – through philanthropic resources – convenes a Youth Apprenticeship Community of Practice, including public, private, and non-profit partners across Indiana to identify barriers to scaling this program statewide.

In addition to regional efforts in Indianapolis, Indiana lawmakers have passed a bill through the House (House Bill 1002) that would create a Career Scholarship Account for high school students to pay for career-related courses, training, or apprenticeship costs – providing \$2,500 to \$5,000 for each student who participates.<sup>18</sup> The Indiana Department of

Education is responsible for approving courses and tracks for the career scholarship accounts. To enroll, students must create a postsecondary plan identifying their education or work options beyond high school. In addition to financial and navigation support for career-related learning, this bill would allow students to use job experience toward high school credits – ensuring workforce training is an equal priority to traditional academic learning.

### **CareerWise Colorado and Affiliated Sites**

Indianapolis’s MAP program is modeled after CareerWise – the U.S. variation on the Swiss youth apprenticeship system. In the CareerWise program, youth apprentices split their time between traditional high school classes and the workplace starting in grade 11 and completing their apprenticeships in their 13<sup>th</sup> year.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the apprenticeship, students have earned a nationally recognized industry certification and some college credit and will have begun to build professional networks.

CareerWise was founded in Colorado in 2016 to address both the skilled worker shortage and the unrealistic expectation that our nation’s schools can prepare students for today’s in-demand jobs without the involvement of industry. Since its launch, more than 1,400 apprentices have been hired by more than 120 employers in Colorado.<sup>20</sup> The program had such an impact in the state, that legislation was signed into law by Governor Jared Polis in July of 2020 that would ensure students could attain a degree or credential based on skills they learned on-the-job, through their CareerWise experience. Public higher education institutions across

the state are now required to award academic credit for work-related experiences.

While the momentum and policy support for the CareerWise model is impressive, it took a sizable staff, significant financial investment, and several years to launch the first CareerWise system. But now with the established model, CareerWise has helped launch affiliate programs, including MAP in Indianapolis, Horizons Education Alliance in Elkhart, CityWorks in Washington D.C., and CareerWise New York City. The efforts of CareerWise demonstrate the robust work it takes to begin and replicate a youth apprenticeship program as well as the importance of having an organization operating as an intermediary that can convene the necessary partners to replicate a successful program while meeting the unique needs of the region.

### **Rhode Island’s PrepareRI**

Rhode Island’s PrepareRI initiative is another one of our nation’s most comprehensive plans to improve youth career readiness.<sup>21</sup> PrepareRI offers career pathways programs for high school students aligned to Rhode Island’s high-demand career fields. These programs offer five work-based learning experiences, including internships, apprenticeship, service-learning, school-based enterprise and industry projects as well as career navigation services – which start in middle school and help individuals create specialized learning plans based on their strengths and interests. Lastly, through PrepareRI, students are able to leave high school with college credit and/or an industry credential. Since its inception, PrepareRI has launched a new program called Two Codes to

boost enrollment in computer science courses; they expanded the number of students participating in career and technical education from 10% to over 40% statewide; the state has doubled the number of students earning college credit through dual or concurrent enrollment and has doubled the number of students earning an industry recognized credential from 15% to 31%.<sup>22</sup>

The state was first able to launch PrepareRI through their New Skills for Youth Grant, funded by philanthropic and nonprofit partners.<sup>23</sup> The program was so impactful in its first five years that even after the philanthropic dollars ended, all participating partners recommitted to the vision, shared work and structures, and continued with the program. Through this coordinated process, the state realized that not one single agency or organization can do this work alone, and now, PrepareRI is run by an inter-agency task force where consistent governance, shared goals, and a collaborative mission have ensured the initiative's success.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These pioneering initiatives in states and cities are creating new opportunities for students who are not college bound to acquire marketable skills and experiences that help them find success upon graduation. Integral to these models are high-quality work-based learning experiences, sufficient resources to develop statewide career pathways, and close collaboration between relevant public partners and employers — driven by the support of intermediaries.

Fortunately, the issues raised in this report seem to be largely exempt from the toxic

partisanship that has blocked progress on so many other urgent national challenges. There are no sharp ideological differences between the two parties when it comes to the need to create more robust career pathways for young people who are not headed to college. And while some want to drag our K-12 schools onto the culture war battleground, we see Republicans and Democrats around the country engaged in fruitful efforts to build career learning and work-based opportunities into high schools.

PPI believes America's public high schools should be reinvented over the next decade to place as much emphasis on career readiness as college prep. That is essential to fulfill our national promise of equal opportunity for all. To achieve this goal, we urge the nation's political leaders to adopt three radically pragmatic policy goals:

### **1. Give every high school student a chance to participate in high-quality work-based learning**

Incorporating work-based learning across high schools in the U.S. enables students to hone job-readiness skills, both social and technical; expand their professional networks; and learn how labor markets work. Schools must work to ensure that work-based learning experiences are available to all students regardless of geographic region, are rigorous, and present a wide spectrum of activities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

**a. Require compensation and transferable skills.** If policymakers want to ensure that all youth can participate in work-based learning experiences, they need to ensure they are paid. This financial support reduces barriers to entry and evens the playing field for students

across socio-economic backgrounds. This policy can take many forms, from industry incentives that help ensure employers pay work-based learning participants, to state-implemented youth employment programs that last a full year rather than just the summer. In addition to pay, work-based learning opportunities must align with the labor-market need and provide transferable skills. Too often students participate in work-based learning and are unable to transfer learned skills to future real-world jobs. Like the legislation passed in Colorado and the Indiana House bill, work-based learning experiences must be designed so competencies and credentials earned are transferrable in the workforce as well as in postsecondary education.

**b. Expand virtual work-based learning options.** While in-person work-based learning opportunities are ideal, policy must also support innovative approaches to ensure young people regardless of place have access to these opportunities. For example, a report by AdvanceCTE found that some states are establishing programs to help rural populations engage in work-based learning, despite access, transportation and logistical challenges — including simulated workplaces in West Virginia, mobile classrooms and labs in Montana and virtual engagement in Louisiana.<sup>24</sup> Federal and state policymakers should consider expanding high-quality virtual work-based learning options like these, providing increased flexibility to existing models to ensure greater accessibility for students.

**c. Require every student develops an individualized career plan with the necessary career counseling support.** As work-based learning opportunities are expanded to all young people, they should be responsible for developing an individualized career plan. This plan, like the ones established in PrepareRI and proposed in Indiana’s House Bill 1002, would help the individual determine the necessary coursework and work-based learning experience related to their skills and interests. This is critical to ensure students have the information to make an informed choice about work-based learning opportunities that best fit their needs and career goals. To ensure schools are equipped to provide students with this information, policy at the federal and state levels should better promote professional development so counselors as well as teachers, mentors, and other in-school supports have the necessary career knowledge and expertise to advise appropriately. This is where partnership is critical: where schools and their staff do not have the necessary expertise, they should be required to work with partners to ensure students have access to high-quality career planning services.

## **2. Boost public investment and make it more effective**

Adequate funding is a big challenge of this work, acknowledging that youth career development efforts take extensive time and resources. It doesn’t help that the one designated source of federal funding for these efforts, CTE is a fraction of overall K-12 spending. To reform our education system in a way that is truly impactful we need to boost public investment. While yes, this means increasing federal, state, and local spending,



it also means using existing resources in a more effective way.

**a. Better leverage existing public dollars.**

A lot of these efforts are allowable across federal programs that support K-12 education, career and technical education and our nation's workforce system. However, to date, federal language across these bills isn't always aligned – meaning definitions, program requirements, and outcome measures differ. As a result, state's often implement related programs separately because it's easier. This means resources that could be used for youth career development efforts are overlooked or used in siloes – creating duplicative and less effective programs. Instead, policy should model Delaware and Rhode Island. These states have worked across education and workforce agencies to develop a coordinated plan of action. These plans align federal programs, creating shared definitions and common outcomes, so they can easily braid and blend resources to fund the state's robust career pathways system.

**b. Repurpose unspent recovery dollars.**

Additionally, over the past two years in response to the pandemic, the federal government has invested in the recovery of communities across the nation, including the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). In ARPA alone, the federal government allocated \$122 billion for K-12 education. As of October 2022, school systems throughout the country reported using less than 15% of these dollars.<sup>25</sup> This is a lot of money being left on the table. As state and local leaders work to spend down existing dollars, they must repurpose the money to go toward career education. This is critical to not only transform high school and make

it work for more students, but also to spend down the federal investment in an impactful way. Additionally, more investment is going to come to states and locals through The Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the CHIPS and Science Act. These policies revolve around ensuring America's workforce remains competitive – getting eligible workers off the sidelines while preparing future workers for in-demand careers. Career pathways, including career coursework and work-based experience, are relevant activities and state and local policymakers should investigate these policies and determine if there are unused as well as upcoming funds that could contribute to their career pathways efforts.

**c. Encourage employers to have skin in the game through public-private partnerships.**

In addition to public investment, national and regional employers, benefiting from a skilled workforce in their community, should be contributing financially to talent development efforts. For example, the MAP apprenticeship program and other CareerWise sites receive funds from participating employers to support student wages and staff capacity. Policymakers must prioritize partnerships like this, between government and the private sector to finance, develop, and operate critical workforce-related programs. This not only helps to ensure costs are shared and industry has skin in the game, but it also ensures youth career development efforts are being driven by industry – guaranteeing programming is of value and aligned to the regional workforce needs.

**d. Develop pay for performance approaches so money doesn't flow endlessly to ineffective programs.** These approaches help ensure public, private, or individual resources invested in these efforts, lead to strong returns on investment. Current federal and state formula funding should be tied to outcomes and performance – providing resources based on a student's enrollment in career-oriented programs and additional dollars tied to the school's performance in ensuring that student's success (i.e., program completion, credential attainment).

### **3. Build strong cross-sector partnerships**

MAP in Indianapolis, CareerWise models across the country, and efforts in Rhode Island and Delaware show us that efforts to redesign high school require an all-hands-on-deck approach. Education (K-12 and postsecondary), workforce development, economic development, industry, and other key stakeholders must work together to design and deliver programs that support students' career learning and experiences so they can transition more seamlessly into their postsecondary path.

**a. Require public agencies to work together.** It is clear public programs need to be better aligned to ensure funds are used more effectively and programs have a stronger impact. To do this at scale, relevant public agencies at the federal and state levels must work together. Policy can support cross-agency collaboration by requiring partnerships in legislation and grant opportunities. This requirement can help reduce duplication and create more efficiency. There can also be incentives for unified or comprehensive state plans, which ensure necessary partners are working together at the state level to implement federal programs – like Delaware and their combined state plan for CTE and

workforce development programs. These efforts are also important to ensure shared accountability across agencies while also developing stronger cross-sector data systems that offer real-time information about career learning outcomes and how young people advance in education and their careers after participating in programming.

**b. Encourage robust employer participation.** None of this work can be done without employers. In addition to policy supporting public-private partnerships to finance these career pathways opportunities, policy must also support efforts to ensure businesses are at the table to design career curriculum, offer work-based learning opportunities, and partner on other related instruction. Policymakers should consider financial incentives (i.e., tax credits, grants, reimbursements, or subsidies) for small and midsize businesses that may need more support in partnering but are often the economic drivers in communities. Policy must also create guidance and support to address perceived employer liability concerns – which vary across states, regions, and even industry by providing transparent understanding of state youth employment laws so industry is more willing to participate in youth career development efforts.

**c. Support and fund regional intermediaries.** Intermediaries have become increasingly crucial actors in the workforce development space – convening necessary partners to develop strong regional skill development strategies, including K-12, postsecondary education,

workforce, community-based organizations and of course industry. Intermediaries not only bring the necessary partners together, but they ensure partners understand each other, they handle most of the logistical processes to stand up a program and can even provide training themselves. These actions incentivize industry participation, removing barriers related to time and cost. Intermediaries, like CareerWise and Ascend are especially important in supporting more intensive work-based learning opportunities like youth apprenticeship because most employers and education providers cannot take on the load of fully supporting a programs like this on top of their day-to-day activities.<sup>26</sup> Policymakers across levels of government must understand the value of intermediaries and commit to supporting these organizations so we can see the critical partnerships sustained and ensure more young people in the U.S. have access to these programs.

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**Taylor Maag** is the Director of Workforce Development Policy at PPI. In this role, Taylor leads the New Skills for a New Economy Project, developing policy solutions that strengthen our nation's workforce, ensuring employers have the talent they need to remain competitive and people have the skills and critical supports necessary to succeed in today and tomorrow's economy.

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