

WHITE PAPER

WORK-BASED LEARNING: KEEPING YOUTH ON TRACK

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What Is Work-based Learning?

Work-based Learning (WBL) is an innovative approach to education that links a young person's academic experience with real-world applications in the workplace.ⁱ Typically, WBL takes place through partnerships between a school and local businesses. However, WBL can be facilitated through third-party organizations, such as nonprofits, during the school year and/or summer breaks. Depending on the program structure and the needs of the students, WBL opportunities may be focused in science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM), or may be purposed more broadly to expose young people to a workplace environment.

Workplace learning experiences can be categorized in the following ways:ⁱⁱ

- **The Length.** WBL may last for a few hours, a few days, or for an extended period of time;
- **The Connection to Course Work.** WBL may be tied to a specific course in a young person's school or independent from specific instruction. For example:
 - In cooperative education, the work-based learning is tied directly to a specific course that a young person is taking in school. Sometimes everyone in a specific class is engaged in a work-based learning experience at the same time. This allows the teacher to have the students connect what they are learning in the classroom with what they are learning in the workplace.
 - Independent WBL experiences are often not tied to a specific school course and could include job shadowing, internships, mentorships, and service learning. These type of experiences could also be procured through a third party organization, such as [Made in Durham](#).
- **Compensation.** Experiences may be paid or unpaid, or may provide some sort of company discount or scholarship.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) includes the following as potential WBL strategies for the state's young people:ⁱⁱⁱ

- [Apprenticeships](#);
- [Business/Industry Field Trips](#);
- [Cooperative Education](#);
- [Entrepreneurial Experiences](#);

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- [Internships](#);
 - [Job Shadowing](#);
 - [Mentorship](#);
 - [School-Based Enterprises](#); and
 - [Service Learning](#).

Regardless of the strategy employed, the goal of WBL is to provide students with real-life work experiences that allow them to make the connection between their current learning and their future employability. WBL increases young people's awareness about careers, encourages them to develop work-place skills, and helps them develop a positive attitude about their own education to career pathway.

The Importance of Work-Based Learning

Connecting a student's investment in their own education to their ability to succeed in the future is critical to convincing young people to stay in school. A failure to do this can have lifelong consequences for students who end up leaving school early or largely disconnecting from education. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that 14 percent of high school dropouts had never held a job by age 20 and 58 percent had never held a job for longer than a year.^{iv} Additionally, a person's lifetime earnings decrease by two to three percent in each year that they do not work.^v

High school dropouts who do participate in the labor force are at a disadvantage. By age 35, over one third have never held a job for five years or longer.^{vi} Intermittent employment can result in financial instability, and employment in and of itself does not necessarily translate into substantial earnings. Without at least a high school degree, disconnected young people are likely to earn low wages over the course of their employment years.^{vii} Moreover, in the absence of a steady job, sufficient wealth or disposable income, individuals with little education face a lifetime of financial hardship and limited opportunities.

However, WBL strategies address the issues of early school leavers and underdeveloped workforce skills together. Some of these strategies include:^{viii}

- Integrating professional skills and industry-related knowledge into lessons and

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- projects to give students a context for what they're learning;
 - Access to real-world experiences, from mentoring and job shadowing to internships, that expose students to possible career paths that show them why an education is important; and
 - Additional support services that are tailored to the needs of students, such as counseling and additional instruction that give students a personalized experience and help ensure they are successful in school and life.

Given that 88 percent of all jobs in the United States will require at least a high school diploma by 2020^{ix}, and that by 2025 there will be over two million unfilled jobs in America due to a lack of unskilled workers^x, it is imperative that WBL strategies are integrated into the education of young people.

Education to Work in Durham

The Durham area alone counts 4,500-6,000 disconnected young people who are off track to obtain a living wage by their mid-twenties.^{xi} These individuals are at significant risk of not completing high school and some have already dropped out. The majority are minorities between the ages of 16 and 24 from low income backgrounds who may face hectic home lives, young parenthood, and transient living situations. For these young people, understanding the connection between their education and future employment is imperative not only to their academic success, but to their participation in the labor force.^{xii} When Durham's young people lack the education, skills, and ambition to join the workforce, the economy of the triangle region suffers at large.

Durham's young people have long been at a disadvantage when it comes to their future success. Over the last two decades, a significant portion of Durham and North Carolina's young people have endured chronic poverty and disengagement from the community at large. Census data from 2000 reported that Durham's poverty rate for individuals 15 years and older was 23 percent of the total population.^{xiii} In 2013 the poverty rate for the same demographic was 29.6 percent.^{xiv}

Research beginning in 2001 shows a steady decline in the number of North Carolina's young people, ages 20 to 24, joining the workforce. The working population as a whole saw

its most steep decline in employment during the 2009 recession. Although North Carolina's overall employment rates have been increasing towards pre-recession levels, only about half of the job opportunities held by young workers have been regained.^{xv}

Durham's minority and low-income young people stand to lose the most from a lack of employment opportunities. Ten years ago the youth-poverty rate in Durham was 29 percent, far higher than the U.S. average of 19 percent and North Carolina's average of 23 percent. That same year, 50 percent of the population of Durham was African American or Latino.^{xvi} Given that the poverty and drop-out rates of students of color far exceed those of white students, an assumption can be made that many of these young people were experiencing a chronic disconnect from both education and the labor force.

The youth poverty and unemployment rate will continue unless major interventions are made to connect young people back to academics and give them the tools to succeed long after they leave school. In 2012, approximately 40 percent of Durham's young people ages 16-24 were not on track to graduate, to enroll in post-secondary education, or to find employment by their mid-twenties.^{xvii} In 2014, the graduation rate for Durham's public schools was 81.5 percent. However, for Durham's African American students, the graduation rate was 78.9 percent. Moreover, one out of four Hispanic students and students who were economically disadvantaged did not graduate from high school in Durham.^{xviii} For these disengaged young people, the connection between their education and future careers was lacking. Given what we know about the youth unemployment and youth poverty rate in Durham, in the absence of an education and developed workforce skills, many are now struggling to obtain living-wage employment.

Work-based Learning Benefits for Young People

Early exposure to the workplace increases a young person's chances of performing well in school, finding employment, and securing sufficient earnings.^{xix} Young people are able to develop the soft skills and social networks necessary to get a job, which is especially important for minority and low-income youth who live with adults that may lack education and/or employment. In addition, workplace experience improves a young person's chances, especially those who are low-income, of attending college. Given that the proportion of disconnected young people in Durham could fill four of Durham's eleven high schools, it is

imperative that the community at large work together to implement work-based learning opportunities that encourage young people to invest in their future.^{xx}

Research shows that WBL programs can significantly influence a young person's decision to pursue education. A seven-year study of a WBL program in California found that minority students participating in the program enrolled in college at twice the rate of minority students who did not participate. Overall, compared to the local and state student population, college enrollment rates were higher for all participating students in WBL programs.^{xxi} Additionally, a poll done by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that 81 percent of high school dropouts felt that having authentic, real-world experiences that connected their schooling with the workplace would have kept them from dropping out.^{xxii}

Participating in a work-based program while in school can greatly increase a young person's chance of employment long after they have left high school. Young people who participate in some sort of employment or WBL experience in high school can increase their salary up to eleven percent for almost a decade after they graduate.^{xxiii} This may be explained by the fact that individuals who were disconnected from school and work in their high school years lack the competencies necessary to compete in today's skills-intensive job market. Exposure to and participation in real-world work experiences improves young people's "soft skills", i.e. communication, working in teams, problem solving, and acting professionally. Research shows that soft skills are critical to a person's life outcomes.^{xxiv}

Work-based learning provides several benefits to young people that improve their primary education experiences as well as their opportunities after high school. These include:^{xxv}

- **An authentic experience.** Young people are able to connect real-world skills back to the classroom. Students link their learning to the knowledge and skills needed in the workforce and are given the autonomy to apply those skills.
- **A reason to stay in school,** graduate, and pursue post-secondary opportunities. By seeing the connection between what they are learning in school to the opportunities available in different career pathways, young people understand the importance of attending and graduating from school.
- **Ownership over learning.** Young people have the opportunity to ask questions of professionals and observe what happens in different career fields. Through these

interactions students are able to identify where their interests lie and can make more informed decisions about their career goals and the education they need to reach those goals.

- **The development of soft skills.** Through work based and project based learning, young people engage in learning activities that involve critical thinking, creative problem solving, teamwork, communication, and conflict resolution. These skills are in high demand in today's workforce.
- **The development of positive social skills.** Young people are given the opportunity to interact with positive mentors and career professionals, and are in-turn expected to act as professionals themselves. Through these WBL interactions, these students develop self-respect, reliability, and an overall positive self-image of themselves.

Additional Benefits of Work-based Learning

To Employers

WBL benefits more than just the young people who participate in these programs. Employers also stand to gain substantially. A few benefits to employers include:^{xxvi}

- **Creating opportunities.** Employers have the opportunity to nurture young people's interest in jobs and careers with their company and in their industry.
- **Providing critical skills development.** Employers help future workers understand the education and skills they need to secure jobs and be successful employees.
- **Building relationships.** Employers have the opportunity to advance their reputation in their communities as supporters of education, community leaders, and providers of good jobs.
- **Influencing instruction.** Employers can form strong partnerships with the local education community and ensuring that what students learn in school translates to the essential skills desired by employers.

To the Community

When young people succeed, the community and society at large benefit. WBL helps keep young people in school and on track to a rewarding career. If the number of young people graduating from high school, completing post-secondary degrees, and contributing in a meaningful way to the labor force increases, the community in which they live improves

overall. Some benefits of WBL to the community include:

- **Reduced financial burden.** Every student who remains connected to their education and graduates from high school saves society \$525,030 including savings associated with health care, crime, and taxes.^{xxvii}
- **Recuperated taxes.** Every student who obtains at least a high school diploma and goes on to work will contribute over \$100,000 more in taxes than those who do not complete high school.^{xxviii}
- **Increased revenue.** If all young people disconnected from school and work instead went on to graduate, complete post-secondary credentials, and obtain living-wage work, the U.S. GDP would increase by \$9.6 billion over time.^{xxix}

Recommendations

Organizations like the [Urban Alliance](#) and [Stanford's Center for Policy Opportunity in Education](#) (SCOPE) have developed several briefs and reports on how state's, schools, and community partners can develop or improve their work-based learning strategies. Below are a few that would be most beneficial for the young people of Durham, North Carolina:

- Developing policies that actively promote pathways to employment by encouraging career training and job experiences for high school students and providing structure through links between high schools and employers. [Urban Alliance]
- Advocating for policy at the state level for legislation that supports the funding of work-based learning initiatives. [SCOPE]
- Developing partnerships with the business community that generate long-term commitments to bring students into the workplace for meaningful experiences. [SCOPE]
- Strengthen incentives for employers to partner with youth workforce development programs and to provide internships and apprenticeships for young people. [Urban Alliance]
- Funding professional development that allows teams of teachers and leaders to develop links between the work-based learning experiences and classroom instruction. [SCOPE]

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- Investing in developing and expanding youth workforce development, internship, and apprenticeship programs that offer comprehensive services and support, especially those that target disconnected and low-income youth. [Urban Alliance]
 - Helping more at-risk youth transition into the workplace through comprehensive programs that develop job skills while also providing mentoring, case management, job placement, and continuing support. [Urban Alliance]
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- i. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publicatins/preparing-21st-century-citizens-role-work-based-learning-linked-learning.pdf>
- ii. <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/cte/curriculum/work-based/>
- iii. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/cte/curriculum/work-based/types/>
- iv. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/02/art4full.pdf>
- v. http://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/12_0604whccs_finalreport.pdf
- vi. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/02/art4full.pdf>
- vii. http://www.serve.gov/new-images/council/pdf/econ_value_opportunity_youth.pdf
- viii. <http://www.linkedlearning.org/get-involved/resources/>
- ix. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/report/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>
- x. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerry-jasinowski/skills-gap_b_6991928.html
- xi. <http://www.mdcinc.org/resources/publications/made-durham-building-education-career-system>
- xii. Ibid.
- xiii. <http://censtats.census.gov/data/NC/1603719000.pdf>
- xiv. <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>
- xv. <http://www.nccommerce.com/lead/research-publications/the-lead-feed>
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- xvii. <http://www.mdcinc.org/resources/publications/made-durham-building-education-career-system>
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- xxi. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/preparing-21st-century-citizens-role-work-based-learning-linked-learning.pdf>
- xxii. <http://www.theurbanalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/UA-Policy-Brief-4.pdf>
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- xxiv. Ibid.
- xxv. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/preparing-21st-century-citizens-role-work-based-learning-linked-learning.pdf>
- xxvi. <http://changetheequation.org/sites/default/files/Guide%20to%20Work-based%20Learning.pdf>
- xxvii. http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NationalStates_seb.pdf
- xxviii. Ibid.
- xxix. <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HighCost.pdf>

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Preparing Our Youth for Careers

Made in Durham is a community partnership of educators, business, government, nonprofits, youth and young adults mobilized around a shared vision that all of Durham's youth will complete high school and a postsecondary credential and begin a rewarding career by the age of 25.

www.madeindurham.org