



# Exploring Summer Youth Employment Programs:

## INCREASING ACCESS THROUGH CAREER PATHWAYS

As state leaders look to build more robust work-based learning (WBL) programs, employers look to fill vacancies and develop talent pipeline strategies and learners look to understand their career plan and increase their earning potential, there are opportunities to better connect summer employment to career pathways, center equity and scale such opportunities statewide. While WBL activities offer youth the opportunity to work with employers, gain valuable work experience and build durable skills, such opportunities are often tied to the academic year.

Summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) are widely offered across the nation in local communities, and some are available statewide. Yet few are centered around adding equitable educational benefits to all learners who participate. To best leverage the investment in and infrastructure for SYEPs, state leaders, employers, intermediaries and local districts and schools should focus on developing critical partnerships to create impactful SYEP experiences for learners that better align SYEPs and career pathways and increase the potential to scale the programs statewide.

### DEFINING WORK-BASED LEARNING

The federal definition of WBL, as defined by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), is “sustained interactions with industry or community professionals in real workplace settings, to the extent practicable, or simulated environments at an educational institution that fosters in-depth, firsthand engagement with the tasks required in a given career field, that are aligned to curriculum and instruction.” However, how these interactions manifest varies greatly by program.

WBL experiences exist in a [continuum](#) that includes career awareness and career exploration as part of an overall plan. SYEPs, however, are often disconnected from this process, limiting the potential for these programs to fully support learners in their exploration of career pathways. To make SYEP opportunities more effective, state and local leaders should ensure that these programs are intentionally aligned with the WBL continuum.

## Work-Based Learning Continuum



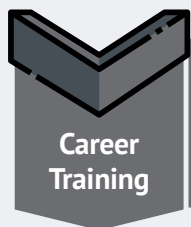
**Learning ABOUT Work:** Learners build awareness about career and postsecondary options through experiences such as field trips and career days.



**Learning ABOUT Work:** Learners explore career and postsecondary options in order to make informed decisions about their future. Learners can explore through job shadowing, mentorships and counseling.




**Learning THROUGH Work:** Learners apply learning through practical experiences such as training programs and simulated work experiences that develop knowledge and core competencies necessary for success in careers and postsecondary education.



**Learning FOR Work:** Learners train for employment and/or postsecondary education by engaging in work experiences such as internships and apprenticeships.

*Adapted from ConnectED<sup>2</sup>*

SYEPs are designed to extend the availability of WBL to support young learners beyond the academic year. These experiences are usually paid work opportunities that incentivize learners to approach the experience with intentionality while gaining knowledge to become fiscally responsible. SYEPs are usually funded through private and public money from the local level, though since federal workforce laws were changed in 1964 to allow these programs to make use of state and federal funding, some programs have done so. The enactment of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 allowed SYEPs to become an optional activity under the [Youth Activities program](#). These SYEPs received a national boost in 2016 through the Summer Jobs and Beyond grant, which allotted \$21 million across 11 communities.



Beyond broad definitions, SYEPs can be challenging to define state by state. The legal definition of “youth” involved in such programs can be within the range of ages 14 to 25 depending on the state or community, while skill development and career pathway exploration can also vary immensely from program to program. SYEP opportunities may also have vastly different target populations, which makes the design of these programs variable. In addition, labor laws affect the design because a program designed for secondary learner experiences will look different than one for postsecondary learner experiences. Other programs may target youth who are no longer engaged in secondary or postsecondary education for reasons such as being justice connected.

Given that SYEPs are often locally developed and supported, such opportunities can differ even within the same state. These differences mean that the quality and accessibility of these programs can vary significantly. Many SYEPs are championed by local leaders such as mayors and county executives. While this involvement often makes community buy-in easier to achieve, as these leaders have the local connections and goodwill of their stakeholders, statewide support can build sustainability into these models if new local leadership that does not have the political will to continue these programs takes over. The state should have a clearly designated role in defining and structuring these programs. Specifically, the state has a critical role in supporting and elevating SYEPs by facilitating partnerships with industry and building cohesive career pathways so that all learners gain an immersive, meaningful and aligned summer employment experience that ultimately supports their successful entry into the workforce.

## Foundational Research on SYEP

[Background and Federal Efforts on Summer Youth Employment Programs](#), [Employer Engagement in Summer Youth Employment Programs](#) and [The Promises of Summer Youth Employment Programs: Lessons From Randomized Evaluations](#) are three research papers that explore the benefits of SYEP opportunities for learners and their communities. While these reports highlight the effects of local programs, many of which are geared toward youth experiencing poverty, they also provide pertinent recommendations that states can use to support these programs, including:

- Develop a metric of success and accountability for youth summer programs;
- Partner with human resources or other intermediaries to increase capacity for the recruitment of learners;
- Improve learner engagement through deliberate job-matching, mentorship and counseling opportunities;
- Reduce barriers to access by providing virtual/hybrid opportunities for learners, and partner with local transit authorities to reduce costs for learners to travel to work sites;
- Develop a funding structure that incentivizes employers to partner with programs for the summer;
- Train teachers and counselors in addition to learners on the application process for more support;
- Find ways to engage the parents or guardians of learners to be an additional line of support; and
- Find ways to engage learners beyond summertime.

Local programs may have pathways built-in, but the state’s support in ensuring that these connections and pathways are available to all of their constituents is critical. Additionally, statewide standardization of outcomes for these programs allows for accountability to provide insight into support for learners. As more jobs require entry-level work experience, capitalizing on young learners’ availability during the summer to access employment and skill development is imperative.

SYEPs are also a viable means of career pathway exploration. Whether learners enter SYEP opportunities before choosing a career pathway or as part of their current career pathway, they are enriched by the experience. These experiences give learners the opportunity to earn money, learn valuable life and professional skills, build necessary work experience and even potentially earn college credits or industry-recognized credentials. This publication explores the barriers affecting the equitable distribution and effectiveness of SYEPs, as well as the proposed strategies states can use to address those issues while connecting these programs to career pathways and the WBL continuum.

## Exploration of Increasing Access to SYEPs Through Career Pathways

In December 2022, in support of the *New Skills ready network* initiative, Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group convened a Summer Youth Employment Shared Solutions Workgroup (SSWG) to explore how states can support the intentional alignment of SYEPs with career pathways and the WBL continuum. Members of the workgroup represent state education agencies, intermediaries, employers and national non-profit and partner organizations. Among the topics explored was the need to find where and how states could scale these programs beyond local limits.



## Review of Programs

In preparation for selecting the SSWG participants, several state and local SYEPs were reviewed to provide context to the group’s work. Additionally, two programs leveraging federal funding were researched based on their specific support of SYEPs. The following programs were selected based on their innovative solutions to common SYEP barriers. Some of these programs rely on intermediaries to support recruiting, onboarding and offboarding processes for local districts. Others partner with local transit authorities to provide free transportation for learners to reach their worksites. Additionally, some programs created virtual or hybrid opportunities for learners to engage in SYEP opportunities from their homes or other offsite spaces supporting virtual engagement. A few examples provided deliberate job-matching for learners, and some programs allowed learners to earn graduation credits or industry-recognized credentials.

## Local Programs

- **Dallas Works, Dallas, Texas:** This program served more than 800 learners in 2021 in the Dallas city limits. By building a coalition of industry partners, non-profit organizations and schools, Dallas Works connects learners ages 14–24 to different career pathways. This program uses an external human resources intermediary to support the program in its hiring process, allowing industry partners to focus more on coaching learners throughout their learning experience. This program also offers learners summer advisers and mentors to support them with targeted career counseling as they explore their career pathways during the program.
- **Mayor Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP), Washington, DC:** Serving almost 10,000 learners, 85 percent of whom are at the secondary school level, the MBSYEP is a 40-year-old program that connects youth to various career pathways, the top five being child care, federal government, performing arts, health care and sports and education. The program partners with Bank On, an organization dedicated to connecting youth and other under-served groups with safe banking options, adding a financial literacy component to the program. The program also partners with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority to give youth free rides on the bus and Metro, removing a barrier to access for the learners.
- **Philadelphia Youth Network, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:** Serving 200 Career Technical Education (CTE) concentrators, Philadelphia Youth Network places and pays young learners for summer jobs and employment. The network recently expanded to service middle school learners. One specific program is Fox Run Farm (one of three farms used in these programs), which allows 16 middle schoolers to experience construction work to help them decide if they would like to choose a career pathway in that field. Learners work on construction, plumbing and even electrical as they build a bunny house. These types of career pathway exploration programs were offered to seventh and eighth graders in the city for the first time in 2022.
- **POWER Youth, Nashville, Tennessee:** Nashville's SYEP includes local human resources and non-profit intermediaries to provide job placement for learners within the city. The program is usually open to learners ages 14–21, though there are special exceptions for justice-involved learners, which expands eligible ages to 24. Employment can last up to 12 weeks and includes payment of up to \$12.50 per hour.
- **Mayor's Summer Jobs Program, Boston, Massachusetts:** The Mayor's Summer Jobs Program is the primary source for industry summer youth program opportunities. Working in partnership with Boston Public Schools and the Private Industry Council (PIC), the program provides opportunities for more than 3,000 Boston learners. The program courts industry partners in the fall, securing summer contracts, and prepares learners for interviews with these partners based on their interests and skill sets. While the industry partners ultimately choose whom they hire, learners who are not placed are usually given an employment opportunity through PIC or a community-based non-profit organization.
- **Summer Youth Job Training Program (SYJTP), Lexington, Kentucky:** Lexington's SYJTP seeks to help rising 10th–12th graders gain work experience and interpersonal skills. This program partners with local employers to offer learners a 20-hour work week while earning \$15 per hour, which is paid through government funding. SYJTP supports 300 learners in their career pathway exploration.



## State Programs

- **Jump Start Summers, Louisiana:** Headed by Louisiana's Department of Education, Jump Start Summers programs offer learners the opportunity to earn during the summer academic Carnegie and/or dual enrollment credit aligned to Fast Forward Opportunities; earn statewide IBCs in Jump Start Pathways adopted by the local school system; engage in WBL by job shadowing, internships or pre-apprenticeships/apprenticeships with at least one committed industry partner; and receive stipends based on attendance, engagement and achievement.
- **PrepareRI Internship Program, Rhode Island:** The PrepareRI Internship Program places Rhode Island high school juniors in paid summer internships with the state's top employers in a range of industries. The internships prepare youth with the skills they need to pursue meaningful, fulfilling futures through professional skills training, on-the-job experience and connections to adult mentors who can help them achieve their career goals. Eligible learners must be at least 16 years old and current juniors attending a Rhode Island public high school. Internships are paid, and learners also earn college credit. These internships last six to eight weeks for 20-35 hours per week. The intermediary Skills for Rhode Island's Future helps select learners and matches them with employers based on learner interests, skills and preparedness.
- **The State/Local Internship Program (SLIP), Pennsylvania:** SLIP operates for eight weeks anywhere between May 1 and August 28 and serves young adults ages 16-24, including those with barriers to employment. SLIP interns may work 25-40 hours per week and earn a minimum of \$10.35 per hour (FICA/Medicare and workers' compensation fringe costs may also be covered depending on learner hours worked). The program incorporates workforce

## Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act:

WIOA offers funding alternatives that can be used to support SYEPs. Since these programs should be designed to give youth the training they need to be successful in the workforce, in addition to enabling them to explore potential career pathways, WIOA grants are a viable source states can leverage to support their summer youth programming.

preparation training that covers the following topics: career readiness skills aligned with the Department of Education's Career Ready PA initiative; resume building and interviewing skills; equity, diversity and inclusion training; and contributing to a respectful workplace. It also covers topics such as preventing workplace harassment, bullying and violence and financial literacy and entrepreneurship.

- **Youth Employment Opportunity Program (YEOP), California:** Managed by the California Employment Development Department, this program helps at-risk youth between the ages of 15 and 25 achieve their educational and vocational goals through various specialized services. These at-risk learners are defined as those who are gang affiliated, youth offenders, teen parents, economically disadvantaged, in a minority group or in foster care or homeless and/or those who have low literacy skills or a disability. YEOP specialists are peer advisers with similar experiences who work as mentors and career coaches to provide referrals to supportive services, career coaching, employment preparation and training.

In 2023, Georgia created an addendum to its statewide WBL plan detailing the requirements for WBL coordinators to create SYEPs. The addendum introduces a stipend that provides a cascading grant to WBL coordinators to support building out their summer programs. The amount of the grant depends on the number of secondary learners enrolled (starting at \$2,500 per teacher for 12-24 enrolled learners). The addendum allows local systems to create programs that work for their learners. Learners also receive graduation credits for completing an SYEP program.

## National Programs

- **National Energy Education Development (NEED) Project, Manassas, Virginia:** NEED has been active for more than 40 years, offering energy education and project-based learning activities and training to learners and educators across multiple states. With an easily adaptable curriculum, the organization partners with school systems to offer K-12 learners exposure to career pathways within the energy sector. Some of these opportunities include WBL programs over the summer, teaching learners of various age groups (including learners ages 18 and older) valuable skills for the workplace and energy sector. The programs offer virtual, hybrid and in-person opportunities.
- **NAF (formerly National Academy Foundation), New York, New York:** NAF is a national non-profit organization that focuses on developing career-relevant curricula for high school students interested in career pathways connected to finance, hospitality and tourism, information technology, engineering and health sciences. Supporting students across 35 states within its academies, which are aligned with the National Career Clusters® Framework, NAF connects with local school districts to create year-round programming, with SYEP opportunities included in the offerings.

## Overcoming Barriers with Virtual SYEP

Virtual opportunities offer a viable solution to transportation or geographic barriers that can hinder scaling SYEP opportunities statewide. They should, however, be designed with intentionality to avoid negative experiences. To adequately build out a virtual program, think about the:

- Infrastructure and the availability of technology resources;
- Accessibility of materials for learners to have a meaningful experience; and
- Employer support for virtual opportunities.

## DEFINING HIGH-QUALITY CAREER PATHWAYS ACCORDING TO THE NEW SKILLS READY NETWORK:

As defined within the *New Skills ready network* initiative, “High-quality career pathways provide learners with the necessary academic, professional and technical skills to excel in their future careers. When designed well, these career pathways equip each learner with the experiences and skills they need for lifelong success, enabling learners to gain social capital through real-world work experiences, get a head start on college by earning postsecondary credits while in high school and earn credentials that are highly valued in the labor market.”



## Connecting the Research to Recommended Actions

At the onset of the SSWG, the group prioritized identifying the major barriers to scaling career pathways from a local to state level including:

- Shortage of state policies prioritizing SYEPs as part of career pathways, which makes finding funding and building capacity difficult due to a lack of designated funds;
- Lack of capacity, in general, as local districts and employers have limited time and resources to stand up and sustain effective partnerships, recruit learners and support all aspects of hiring learners;
- Difficulty ensuring equitable access to these programs for learners including, but not limited to, addressing transportation barriers; and
- Lack of meaningful connection between SYEP opportunities and career pathways or the WBL continuum, lessening the potential impact these programs have on learners' career plans and limiting what could be a major talent pipeline for in-demand careers.

With these barriers identified, the SSWG developed a list of recommendations to address opportunities to open learner access to SYEPs with intentionality, while simultaneously connecting SYEPs to career pathways. The SSWG also identified the need for state-level champions of SYEPs to help ensure that the resources that go toward funding and industry partnerships take summer youth employment into consideration. As the group considered state

support for scaling these programs, they identified virtual or hybrid opportunities and using school buses as summer transport as ways states could reduce barriers to transportation. More broadly, the group recommended that states create toolkits and guides for districts, employers and intermediaries to build capacity and help centralize important programmatic touchpoints.



The infamous “summer slide,” a term used by practitioners to explain the regression in learner academic skills from the end of the previous year to the beginning of the new school year, is complex but can be partially curtailed by the rigor of these WBL opportunities. Employers can use these programs in conjunction with their talent pipeline strategies, including seeing a properly organized SYEP as an effective use of limited resources to hire efficiently.

The keys to economic mobility should be available to all youth within a state, and SYEPs, when intentionally designed to provide career pathway explorations and connections to the WBL continuum, can be a powerful way to empower youth and create long-term benefits for the state's workforce. Scalability beyond the local level requires state-level leadership and support. If states leverage their industry partnerships and provide funding for these programs to support the proper training of education and industry professionals to coach and mentor learners, remove barriers to access for individuals and provide success and accountability metrics for programs, then all of their learners will thrive.

## Recommended Actions for Increasing Access to SYEPs Through Career Pathways

[\*Without Limits: A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education \(CTE Without Limits\)\*](#) posits that a cohesive, flexible and responsive career preparation ecosystem that closes equity gaps in educational outcomes and workforce readiness is the goal states should be working toward. All learners deserve an opportunity to access impactful and equitable SYEP experiences that are connected to career pathways and the WBL continuum. The following recommended actions are designed to inspire action for stakeholders to help focus on connecting SYEPs to career pathways, centering equity and scaling SYEPs. Each of the recommendations are connected to a specific stakeholder owner to potentially assume the responsibility of implementing the recommendation to prepare learners for success in engaging in employment opportunities connected to their tailored career pathway or plan.



# STATE AGENCY

## Allocate Funding and Develop Supportive Policies for SYEP Implementation

*Develop supportive policies and award funds to local school districts or intermediaries (if applicable) to bolster the infrastructure, systems, staffing and resources needed for sustainable SYEP implementation. Innovative policy development and fund allocations can help support the following:*

- Allowing aligned, high-quality SYEP experiences to count for graduation requirements and for Perkins V, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and state accountability measures;
- Recruiting and hiring state and regional WBL coordinators to facilitate relationships between employers and learners and continuing support throughout the WBL continuum;
  - Local WBL coordinators can also serve as SYEP coordinators with responsibilities to monitor learner progress through check-ins with supervisors and learners throughout the experience.
- Training and development of SYEP coordinators, if there is not already an identified WBL coordinator for year-long programs;
- Securing an intermediary to serve as the lead entity that coordinates employer and learner recruitment, matching and placement in SYEPs and administration of the program;
- Providing wages for learners or stipends for learners with undocumented status;
- Offering transportation services for learners to and from employer worksites; and
- Developing new or improving existing data systems to track learner progress and success outcomes to improve programming and inform future programs.

## Centralized Communication Support

*Provide centralized communication support to facilitate relationships among employers, learners and school districts. Some strategies include:*

- Developing a statewide online portal (with built-in access for local school districts) to share and disseminate information about SYEPs with learners, their families and employers;
- Centralizing communications and messages about SYEPs from the state to the local level to make learning about and engaging with SYEPs easier for all stakeholders; and
- Developing an SYEP communications strategy and materials in collaboration with key government officials and legislative leaders (e.g., governor, legislators) to ensure supportive, effective messaging to promote SYEP expansion and secure future funding.

## Streamline Employer Engagement and Support

*Provide guidance and strategic support to help streamline employer engagement and ensure consistent onboarding for employers prior to the beginning of learner participation in the SYEP experience. Some strategies include:*

- Assessing state-level data on high-demand, high-growth industries and job needs to guide the recruitment and outreach strategy to employers that will benefit most from engaging with SYEPs;
- Engaging intermediaries to support stakeholder engagement and streamline employer outreach through collaboration and coordination with chambers of commerce, trade associations and state and local workforce boards;
- Engaging workforce services agencies funded by the Department of Labor to support the recruitment of employers, provide education on labor laws and support employers in overcoming liability challenges related to employing youths;
- Administering pre-assessments and post-evaluations for all stakeholders and incorporating employer feedback on the SYEP;
- Determining an evaluation and progress monitoring system for supervisors and coordinators to provide input on learner success throughout the SYEP experience;
- Offering employers support for centralized background checks and wage documentation for learners participating in SYEPs; and
- Developing an employer onboarding toolkit that encompasses the following:
  - A guide for supervisors on coaching learners on accomplishing higher-level responsibilities and mastering durable and transferable skills,
  - Mentorship program models and approaches utilizing leaders within an employer organization or a near-peer structure to help learners acclimate to the environment, learn culture and accomplish tasks and support learners on their career pathway journey,
  - Details about the time commitment, roles and responsibilities for documentation of hours for credit-awarding experiences,
  - Progress monitoring and evaluation tools for supervisors to provide input on learner success and assess learner performance throughout the SYEP experience,
  - Training and development modules on cultural competency, and
  - Information on liability and labor laws.

# INTERMEDIARY (State or Local)

## Support Alignment with Career Pathways and Enhance State Capacity

*Leverage best practices from successful local SYEP models to bring strategies to scale statewide. Seek and encourage alignment opportunities through collaboration, coordination and cooperation among critical stakeholders. Some strategies include:*

- Communicating and sharing resources with employers to help align learner career pathways to employer/industry offerings while incorporating durable and transferable skills;
- Aligning SYEP offerings with high-wage, in-demand occupations;
- Garnering support from chambers of commerce, trade associations and workforce boards to convene employer partners and effectively scale employer participation;
- Recruiting a variety of employers that can offer paid experiences for learners in a number of career pathways/fields;
- Recruiting staffing agencies or other operational assistance to offer third-party employer of record and application processing services;
- Developing collaborative data tracking supports and feedback loops that monitor and communicate program success;
- Providing learners with virtual access to SYEPs to ensure that opportunities are not limited by physical location and local employers; and
- Convening workgroups that are inclusive of multiple stakeholders (e.g., employers, school administrators, school counselors, previous SYEP participants) to help overcome barriers to entry for learner participation in SYEPs.

## Support Employer and Local School District Engagement

*Support and foster collaboration between employer partners and local school districts to increase opportunities for learners and connection to career pathways. Some strategies to engage employers and local school districts include:*

- Hosting industry sector-based roundtable discussions focused on developing effective talent pipeline strategies to educate employers on the value proposition of engaging in SYEPs and career pathways;
- Providing opportunities for employers and local school district coordinators to meet, share perspectives and align expectations;
- Organizing and delivering training and development on cultural competency honoring the values of different cultures;
- Planning and hosting meet-and-greet events for employers to build relationships with local school district administrators, practitioners, parents and learners; and
- Engaging employer partners to encourage participation in WBL career exploration activities throughout the year to cultivate long-term relationships with learners and their respective schools.



# LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

## Determine Learner Selection and Preparation Processes

Ensure that selection processes are equity centered, with learner preparation supports offered prior to the SYEP experience. Learner selection and preparation processes can include:

- Training and development of WBL and/or SYEP coordinators delivering content and skill development activities to learners;
- Conducting practice interview and real-world scenarios to prepare learners for employer and workplace interactions;
- Providing results from learner interest inventory to have appropriate SYEP experience matching for non-CTE/career pathways learners;
- Formalizing and connecting Individualized Career Academic Plans to include SYEP experiences;
- Developing lesson plans to embed in WBL and SYEP coursework to provide learners career exposure;
- Providing digital literacy supports, including the skills and knowledge to effectively use the internet and other digital technology; and
- Supporting learners in understanding how to interact within an employer setting.

## Conduct Learner Recruitment and Engage Families

Engage learners and families to promote SYEP opportunities to all learners and identify access barriers to increase participation. Some strategies to recruit for and improve SYEPs include:

- Identifying, preparing and leveraging trusted messengers, such as school counselors, current learners and alumni, to share information about the return on investment of SYEP participation;
- Developing an inventory to capture the various barriers that may prevent a learner from participating in an SYEP, including leveraging learner voice to design and improve programs ([With Learners, Not for Learners: A Toolkit for Elevating Learner Voice in CTE](#));
- Developing and maintaining social media campaigns to increase awareness about the value of SYEP experiences;
- Providing user-friendly information on labor market data and career pathways;
- Distributing and promoting participation requirements while providing learners accessible supports for completing the SYEP application process;
- Conducting direct outreach and recruitment to under-represented schools and communities; and
- Developing feedback loops to communicate program success and improvements identified by ongoing input.



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