



Organized Labor Playbook



Unlocking Career Success

This Playbook provides steps in which organized labor (such as teacher unions and building trades) can blur the lines between high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce. Organized labor plays a significant role to Raise the Bar for student success by contributing to an *education-to-workforce* system that focuses on Unlocking Career Success.

Step 1

Partner with Stakeholders

Step 2

Connect with Affiliates

Step 3

Leverage Membership

Step 4

Advocate for Industry

Partner with CTE programs, Schools, Districts, and Higher Education

One of the most powerful ways that organized labor can contribute to the career-connected ecosystem is by partnering directly with Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, schools, districts, and higher education. When partnering directly consider how to:



Support professional learning. Build a community of excellent teachers and faculty that promote engagement in high-wage, high-demand industries. Sponsoring educator externships is a great way to help local school staff better understand the needs of business and industry and to keep pace with technological and workplace changes. Externships are a unique professional development opportunity for educators and school counselors to engage in a workplace setting that is not a school and to learn directly from industry about employment opportunities and skill requirements for youth.



Prepare students for the transition beyond high school by helping to educate students and families about career pathways, related labor market information (LMI), wrap-around services, and postsecondary and training opportunities to accomplish their goals, which can include registered apprenticeship or industry credential programs.

Tools for partnering directly with educational entities:

Support curriculum development

ACE Charter High School in Camarillo, California, is an independent public charter school with a skilled trades focus that allows students to choose between four major pathways: Construction, Engineering, Architecture, and Computer Science. Its project-based programming is strengthened by a partnership with the Sheet Metal Workers' Local Union No. 104, or SMART Local 104, a union that spans 49 California counties from the Oregon border to Ventura County, and includes International Baccalaureate curricula.



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Tools for partnering directly with educational entities (continued):

Develop exposure opportunities including pre-apprenticeship programs and internships

In Louisiana, Vernon Parish School District partnered with Capture Point Solutions LLC and the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters to launch a high school pre-apprenticeship program with a clean energy focus. This program, the Capturing Better Futures Initiative, takes place at Leesville High School and trains high school students to work in the carbon management industry by preparing them for streamlined entry into registered apprenticeships.

In Oregon, the Gresham-Barlow School District offers FAST (Future Apprentices in the Trades) Track programs at two high schools, providing students with pathways to certification in construction or metal manufacturing through Oregon's Bureau of Labor and Industry (BOLI). Through a combination of CTE coursework and internships, students leave high school as certified pre-apprentices and receive special consideration and priority for several apprenticeship programs because of the partnerships with labor and industry (e.g., SMART Local 16, NECA-IBEW Electricians Union, UA 290, Northwest College of Construction, Pacific Northwest Carpenters Institute, and more).

Each summer, the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association, also known as SMACNA, and their partners run a series of Heavy Metal Summer Experience camps throughout the country to allow 15–19-year-old students to gain first-hand experience in the sheet metal, piping, and plumbing trades. In addition to working alongside craft professionals and learning concrete skills, students also tour active job sites and union training facilities to get a sense of local apprenticeship programs.

Partner with Higher Education partners

The Augusta Building and Construction Trades Council and Augusta Technical College (ATC) in Georgia signed an MOU to streamline workforce development collaboration to enhance career opportunities and support the growth of skilled professionals in various high-demand industries. Key components of their partnership include ATC training for incumbent Augusta Building and Construction Trades Council workers, union representation on the college's Advisory Committees, and expansion/promotion of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs.



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Connect with your national affiliates

National affiliates support regional and local operations. When working collaboratively, local and national unions can leverage scale and geographic diversity to advance cohesive messaging and share resources. When connecting with your national affiliates consider how to:



Leverage federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins) and Workforce Innovation and Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) processes to support the alignment of education and the workforce development system and coordination of sector strategies. There are two key federal laws that influence our education and workforce development system: (1) Perkins V, and (2) WIOA. Perkins V and WIOA are administered by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor and provide a range of opportunities for business leaders to get involved and embed industry and skill needs across the education and workforce development system.



Braid financial resources to leverage federal and state funds across the P12, postsecondary, and workforce development system to create and scale career pathways and to provide wrap-around and transition services for youth, which can include flexibilities in Perkins and other federal funding (e.g., see guidance on American Rescue Plan (ARP), Apprenticeship, and Educator Preparation).

Tools for connecting with your national affiliates:

Broaden exposure to Registered Apprenticeship models

For students interested in entering the workforce upon graduation, organized labor and national affiliates can support students and families by providing information about registered apprenticeship opportunities by highlighting resources like the U.S. Department of Labor's Earn While You Learn Today and Apprenticeship Finder.

Leverage national resources for regional programs

Each semester (fall and spring), the Finishing Trades Institute of the Mid-Atlantic Region (FTI-MAR) hosts a 15-week Vocational Internship Program (VIP) for Philadelphia students to learn foundational building trades skills in preparation for a variety of registered apprenticeship programs. FTI-MAR collaborates with multiple unions to ensure curriculum quality and applicability, including the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) and the North American Building Trades Union (NABTU). High school juniors and seniors, primarily from Philadelphia Public Schools, leave VIP with industry-recognized credentials and six academic credits that are transferable to institutions such as the Community College of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania State University.



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Leverage the power of membership to advance career-connected learning

Career-connected learning supports young people to get good jobs that provide stability, a livable wage, agency, and mobility. But to support students at scale, it requires partnerships at scale and expertise from different stakeholders. When leveraging the power of organized labor membership to advance career-connected learning consider how to:

- Support career mentorship.* Each region, state, district, and municipality are distinct and require a variety of supports to help students navigate their postsecondary and career options. Mentorship is a great way to introduce students to different career options and inform postsecondary and career decision making.
- Create learning opportunities in the workplace* which can be an animating force for effective cross-system alignment. Note, departments of Labor and workforce development boards frequently refer to relevant real world-learning as “work experiences” while educational systems often use the term “work-based learning” to mean the same type of career-connected learning.
- Commit to equity as a driving factor* by ensuring that career-connected learning opportunities exist for individuals of all backgrounds, especially those from underserved populations, support student transition across different types of education and training, and embed student and community voice.

Tools for leveraging the power of membership:

Celebrate and Uplift Student Choice

Celebrate the variety of choices students can pursue in high school. The Yuma Union High School District celebrates student success through career and technical student organizations like the SkillsUSA state championships. Reach Higher Shasta hosts a college and career signing day that celebrates students who are pursuing many different postsecondary options like registered apprenticeships, community colleges, and the military.

Convene subpopulations in support of career-connected learning

Women in Nontraditional Careers (WINC) is a 16-week pre-apprenticeship program for Philadelphia residents that is hosted by FTI-MAR. Each cohort of women (18+) is trained on foundational building trades skills in preparation for a variety of registered apprenticeship programs. Participants earn industry-recognized credentials and receive both an hourly wage and support funding for items such as professional clothes, gear, and technology. Site visits around the Philadelphia metropolitan area are central to the WINC experience, allowing program participants to see first-hand the applicability of what they are learning.

Leverage national connections with employers

In Wisconsin, Wauwatosa East High School is running a certified pre-apprenticeship program through an industry-funded HVAC lab. By partnering with local SMART affiliate (number 18) as well as several local companies (including JM Brennan, Total Mechanical, and Air Flow Inc), the school district was able to establish one of only two such high-school pre-apprenticeship programs in the state to build construction skills within the K-12 system.



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Be an Advocate for Industry

Robust career pathways play a vital role in shaping our country’s future, both by ensuring a continuous flow of skilled talent into the workforce and by increasing access to good-paying jobs for the next generation of professionals. Through specific, intentional mechanisms, organizations can support employee growth, address future workforce needs, and create clear, actionable routes for long-term career advancement. When advocating for industry consider how to:

- Address occupational segregation* by focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility within career pathway programs by exposing students to a range of career options that highlight in-demand, high-wage, and high-skill jobs and the career pathways to achieve them.
- Partner with other employer groups.* These can include employer associations, chambers of commerce, business roundtables, and other groups. Work together to collect and share employer and industry needs, signal skill and occupational needs within and across industries, and build the capacity of employers to work with education and the workforce development system.
- Prioritize high-need areas.* When determining workforce and skill priorities, it is important to first consider which sub-sectors and pathways within an industry need the most support, as well as which communities are underserved (e.g., rural communities, communities of color). It is important to incorporate an equity lens into all steps of recruitment and training processes.

Tools to advocate for industry:

- Communicate the value of career-connected learning**
Help dispel misconceptions, like Mundelein High School’s Pathways Handbook (IL), a student and family-facing handbook explaining what career pathways are, why they matter, and other helpful tools.
In Minnesota, the Academies of Shakopee (MN) provides a library of videos and other public engagement tools for local high school career academies to empower students to explore careers without limiting options.
- Share LMI broadly**
Unions can share LMI or encourage youth to connect with the local workforce development board to help enroll in out-of-school time programs sponsored under WIOA. School counselors can reference the Department of Labor’s YouthRules for resources about youth labor rights when supporting youth employment opportunities.
- Engage families and guardians**
In California, San Clemente High School hosts a Meet the Industry Night, an annual event that brings together students, parents, and industry partners.



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