

The Vermont Work-Based Learning Roadmap

Roadmap Goal: By 2030, every student in Vermont participates in at least one work-based learning experience prior to high school graduation.

CABOT SAYLES · 2026

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Executive Summary

ROADMAP OBJECTIVE: By 2030, every student participates in at least one work-based learning experience before graduation.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT: Outcomes of work-based learning include: (1) stronger skill development; (2) greater confidence, direction, and sense of self; (3) stronger communities and local economies.

WHAT WORK-BASED LEARNING IS: Work-based learning (WBL) is a part of the Flexible Pathways Initiative, Act 77 of 2013, and can be any career connected learning experience.

WHY VERMONT NEEDS A WBL ROADMAP: Work-based learning is inconsistently implemented across Vermont. There is high demand for WBL from students and employers and not enough capacity to implement it properly. The roadmap lays out the barriers to implementation and describes how to build conditions that overcome them.

THEORY OF CHANGE

01 Build the conditions that allow every high school in Vermont to provide WBL	02 Work-based learning → for every student before graduation	03 WBL strengthens → student outcomes	04 Vermont builds → stronger workforce pipelines and communities
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BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Logistics: Lack of transportation & conflicting scheduling | 6. Difficult to navigate liability and compliance |
| 2. Not enough WBL staff/coordinator capacity | 7. Inconsistencies in credit for WBL |
| 3. Lack of student and community awareness | 8. Lack of administrative and cultural support |
| 4. Siloed professional networks | 9. Not enough student voice and agency |
| 5. WBL domain confusion | 10. Lack of data |

HOW WE SOLVE THESE BARRIERS: The roadmap makes ten recommendations, each responding directly to one of the ten barriers.

- R1** Coordinate transportation regionally
- R2** Fund a full-time WBL coordinator at every high school
- R3** Start career education earlier and celebrate WBL
- R4** Create a regional WBL intermediary in every county, connected by a statewide network
- R5** Give updated guidance on WBL

- R6** Make it easy for employers to participate
- R7** Create a pathway to award core credit for WBL
- R8** Build educator and administrator buy-in through professional development
- R9** Design programs with students at the center
- R10** Build the data foundation: measure, define, and map WBL statewide

70 INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

BY ROLE

- 45** WBL coordinators, Flexible Pathways coordinators, co-op coordinators, and others performing those duties at a high school or CTE center
- 15** Other stakeholders
- 5** Intermediaries
- 5** State employees, across all states

BY STATE

- 50** Vermont
- 8** Massachusetts
- 7** Maine
- 5** New Hampshire

Introduction

“One opportunity can change the trajectory of a student’s life.”

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

My Story

Work-based learning is an important part of my story. As a recent graduate of a public high school in central Vermont, I can confidently say that work-based learning changed the trajectory of my life. The work-based learning that I did included mentoring students at the local middle school and getting credit for work I was doing at local businesses. These experiences, especially mentoring students, were very meaningful to me.

The type of experience was a small part of the big impact work-based learning had on my education. Being able to learn outside of the classroom and the recognition that learning by doing is legitimate was most important for me. I learned skills to be successful in the real world, and how those skills connected with my education in the school building. I became far more successful academically after doing work-based learning and I certainly would not be in college without it. Before work-based learning, I was prepared to drop out of high school and likely would have done so. Work-based learning was fundamental to what I otherwise viewed as a frustrating and flawed education. Just having the opportunity as an option didn’t mean much to me. It was the recognition of need, unwavering support from an advisor, and ease of the process that made it possible. I didn’t do work-based learning because I

thought it would enhance my education (even though it did). I did it because it made sense to me when the rest of my education did not. That ended up being the best thing I could have done for my education and my future.

Since graduating, I have had the privilege of reading letters from current high school students who also did work-based learning. In each of the stories I hear about the same powerful impact that I had experienced. These stories led me to realize that successful outcomes from work-based learning are not rare occurrences. There is a pattern of students who found their path specifically through work-based learning. My personal conviction has grown so that I now strongly believe work-based learning is too valuable to be treated as an "alternative" pathway. Experience is a fundamental part of education. Work-based learning is not a replacement of traditional education, it is additive and what it adds is essential.

Upon starting this project, I quickly realized, as practitioners in this field know well, that there is a strong need for the development of work-based learning programs across the state. Seeing such variation in access to opportunities is disappointing when considering the amount of potential we are missing out on by not prioritizing work-based learning. However, it makes me hopeful for the amount of improvement we could see, if we choose to prioritize education that actually works for students.

Vermont Can Do Better

Maine, a close to home example, had over 6,000 youth do over 8,000 Extended Learning Opportunities (the term for work-based learning in Maine) from 2022-2024. They created over 2,000 new school/employer partnerships and awarded over 2,000 academic credits. More than 80% of those students said the programs

increased their awareness of careers and impacted their future plans. Ninety-two point five percent of students said they were more optimistic about their future after participating. Ninety-nine percent of employers in Maine said they would host a student again, 77% found programs a good way to attract talent, and 77% hired at least one former participant.

While some states have done well in measuring the impact of WBL, there is not much WBL specific data available in Vermont. When people outside of the education ecosystem learn about WBL they want to know things like what is offered, how many students do it, what types of jobs they do, what the outcomes are. These are difficult conversations when we don't have data to give quantitatively backed answers. This lack of data is why the roadmap is largely based on interviews with practitioners.

Vermont Should Do Better

Vermont's WBL coordinators consistently note the powerful impact of work-based learning on students *and* employers. They report that students who engage in WBL often experience stronger soft skill development, greater self confidence and direction, and are more connected with their communities. Investing in WBL is about more than adding another thing to a student's education. It can change the lives of students and those effects are felt throughout the community.

Roadmap Process

This roadmap draws on three sources of evidence: 70 Interviews with WBL professionals, a review of current academic and industry related WBL literature, and a comparative policy analysis across eight states: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Iowa, Colorado, Wyoming, Louisiana, and Washington. In Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts interviews and policy analysis were conducted. In

Iowa, Colorado, Wyoming, Louisiana, and Washington, policy analyses were conducted. All quotes used in this roadmap come from WBL coordinators or professionals in adjacent roles.



CABOT SAYLES

70 INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

INTERVIEWS BY ROLE

45 WBL coordinators, Flexible Pathways coordinators, co-op coordinators, and others performing those duties at a high school or CTE center



15 Other stakeholders



5 Intermediaries



5 State employees, across all states



INTERVIEWS BY STATE

50 Vermont



8 Massachusetts



7 Maine



5 New Hampshire



What Is Work-Based-Learning?

Work-based learning is a part of The Flexible Pathways Initiative (Act 77) passed in 2013. Act 77 was intended to support school districts in the creation of high quality educational experiences, to promote opportunities for personalized post-secondary readiness among Vermont students, and to increase graduation rates and post-secondary continuation and retention rates. Work-based learning itself can be any career connected educational experience. Specific definitions of WBL differ depending on the school or program.

THE CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING CONTINUUM

01

Awareness

- Career days & fairs
- Field trips
- Guest speakers

02

Exploration

- Job shadows
- Informational interviews
- Worksite visits

03

Preparation

- Volunteering
- Internships
- Service learning

04

Training

- Paid work experience
- Pre-apprenticeship
- On-the-job training

WBL can be any experience along the continuum — from a career fair to a paid work experience.

Adapted from the Vermont Agency of Education (2025), Vermont Work-Based Learning Manual.

WBL takes place in both PreK-12 and CTE centers. It is not exclusive to either. WBL in CTE is often closely related to the program of study the student is doing. Making sure WBL is available in PreK-12 schools as well as CTE centers is important because it allows greater opportunity for a larger and more diverse population of students to participate and benefit from career connected learning.

This roadmap will frequently reference WBL coordinators. WBL coordinators are professionals in schools whose role is to help students participate in WBL. They may also act as a liaison between their school and outside partners and help students prepare for careers in ways beyond WBL such as interview and resume building skills. “WBL coordinator” is not always the formal title, or the full time job, of the professional in a school doing this work. For the purpose of the Roadmap, I will refer to all professionals who perform these duties as “WBL coordinators.”

The roadmap will also refer to “intermediaries.” Intermediaries exist independently from schools and provide an additional layer of support to work-based learning. They provide support for both schools and employers who participate in WBL.

WBL Outcomes

“I don’t think there’s an ace card that can beat the experience ever.”

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

Why should we care about WBL? WBL consistently drives highly positive outcomes for students.

The benefits of WBL also show up for students long before graduation. These are the most frequently reported outcomes of WBL according to professionals.

1. Stronger skill development

WBL teaches skills that are learned most effectively by doing. Time management, communication, teamwork, and problem

solving are necessary to succeed in professional environments. WBL forces students to learn these skills, or else face real world consequences. Many coordinators noted the difference in readiness they observed in students who participated in WBL vs. those who didn’t.

“These experiences force students to learn skills that couldn’t be taught in a classroom but are learned organically in a work setting — this is the condition that is not replaced by school.”

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

“There’s a whole lot of transferable skills that Vermont says every high school student should graduate with... communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking — and all the microskills underneath each of those categories.”

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

“When you have two students side by side, everything else being equal, the one with the work-based learning experience has just added so much value to their knowledge, their skills, their networking, their resume building, their decision making.”

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

2. Greater confidence, direction, and sense of self

WBL can build confidence, direction, and a sense of self in students. For many of the students who are fortunate enough to participate, WBL can be the most impactful experience of their education and be a determining factor in their future. A 2025 study from YouScience found that 77% of

students believed they would have been more engaged if they better understood their aptitudes/career options. Another report from Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance) in 2023 also found that 87% of former interns say that experience helped them understand the career they want.

"When work-based learning is done right, it empowers kids to see a version of themselves that maybe they haven't seen in school... the students are able to reach intellectual goals that I think otherwise they feel they've been prevented from reaching."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"I just see how proud of themselves they are, and just the joy they have instead of the frustration of sitting there in the classroom not understanding."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"It's been such a game changer for a lot of students... students have their interest and they pursue the pathway and it confirms what they want to do or helps them figure out what they don't."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

3. Building community and strengthening local economies

The benefits of WBL extend beyond the individual. WBL is often described as a way to build community and strengthen local economies. Coordinators frequently mentioned that WBL increases the amount of students who choose to stay in their communities after graduating. Coordinators also often discuss the

eagerness of Vermont employers to participate in WBL.

"It was no longer a conversation about you having to go away to become an important leader and professional in this community. You can stay here and do that."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"At least 50% of my students will stay with their employer for at least a period of time afterwards... Our longer-term employers are really seeing this as a pipeline for good, steady, quality employees."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"I had one employer say to me... 'Man, you keep turning kids out like this and the world has hope.' That's been uplifting."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

WBL is not a new idea, it is a very old one. Our opportunity as a state is not to invent something new, but to lean into what already works. We have the ability to give every Vermont student an educational experience that can change the trajectory of their life.

The Implementation Gap

The implementation of The Flexible Pathways Initiative, Act 77, in Vermont has been highly inconsistent since passing in 2013. WBL was unfunded in Act 77. This has made it very challenging for some high schools to develop programs who didn't already have

resources to back it. Further, it created an equity issue, limiting opportunities for students depending on what school they attend.

Some high schools in Vermont have multiple full time staff and dedicated budget lines for Flexible Pathways and WBL, while others have someone responsible for WBL only as a fraction of their job. However, both well resourced programs and non-existent ones face challenges with growth.

Work-based learning programs struggle to grow because of persistent barriers to implementation. Nearly every interviewee observed increasing student and employer demand for WBL. Nationally, a 2022 report from Britebound found that nearly 80% of high school students were interested in a WBL experience, while only 2% had completed an internship during high school. The bottleneck is on the supply side. Demand for WBL comes from both students, who desire more hands-on education, and employers, who are looking for new talent. Coordinators sit in the middle with sometimes very limited resources to serve both sides.

Some WBL coordinators interviewed during the roadmap process even expressed concern about exposing more students to WBL opportunities because the anticipated increase in demand would be too overwhelming for them to manage. This is an uncomfortable position for coordinators to be in when they know how valuable WBL can be for students. Even schools in Vermont known for strong WBL programs face challenges when it comes to implementation at scale. **In all the interviews conducted, there were no examples of schools that felt they had fully met demand for WBL.**

This roadmap draws on interviews to identify barriers to implementation of WBL that exist at all stages of program

development. The goal is to help Vermont build its WBL programs to the point that every student participates in WBL before graduation. Through the roadmap process, we identified 10 barriers to implementation:

1. Logistics: Transportation & Scheduling
2. WBL Staff/Coordinator Capacity
3. Student and Community Awareness
4. Professional Networks
5. WBL Domain Confusion
6. Liability and Compliance
7. Credit for WBL
8. Administrative Support and Culture
9. Student Voice and Agency
10. Data

Additionally, we identified key features of successful programs and turned those into 10 recommendations on how to build conditions to create successful WBL programs in every Vermont school. The roadmap is intended to raise awareness among education and policy leaders about the importance of work-based learning for Vermont, what barriers are keeping WBL programs from reaching their full potential, and proven strategies to overcome those barriers.

Theory of Change

Demand for work-based learning exists. The outcomes from WBL are positive. The problem is inability to meet demand. This roadmap is not trying to build demand, it is laying the path to build the conditions that meet the demand.

Build the conditions that allow every high school in Vermont to provide WBL



Work-based learning for every student before graduation



WBL strengthens student outcomes



Vermont builds stronger workforce pipelines and communities

What Are the Barriers to Implementation?

Below are the barriers to implementation. Barriers are broken into four parts, plus one foundational barrier:

1. Logistics, Capacity, and Resources
2. Coordination and access to information
3. Incentives and Laws
4. School Culture and Student Voice

Foundational barrier: Lack of Data.

Barriers are not in any particular order because they were all identified as important by the majority of WBL coordinators in Vermont. There is not yet enough data on WBL to assess the relative importance of each barrier.

PART ONE

Logistics, Capacity, and Resources

1. LOGISTICS

Transportation

PROBLEM: There are not enough vehicles or people to get students to WBL.

Not all students have access to personal transportation and not all schools have the vehicles, people, or time to transport students to WBL sites. Transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to WBL in the country. The rurality of Vermont makes this an even more prominent barrier. The more rural the area, the more difficult

transportation gets. Transportation rarely stops being an issue as a program grows, but with more resources and better systems for coordination it can be less limiting. Transportation can be a two-sided problem faced by schools and community partners.

"The disadvantage is the fact that transportation, and I'm sure you'll hear this at every single school, is such a barrier. I'm writing grants, I'm begging departments to give me money for transportation. It's so expensive".

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"If you ask any work based learning coordinator in the state, one of the big things that comes up all the time is that transportation can be tough. I've had to pull kids because their truck or car broke down and they couldn't get to their place, which is really sad. Sometimes it's hard because work places are constantly changing every day. You know, some of the electrical kids work at different spots almost every day."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

Scheduling

PROBLEM: Students' school schedules conflict with WBL.

Scheduling and time conflicts are also barriers. Scheduling WBL during class times and around employer schedules can be difficult. It can create hard decisions for students who are facing a choice between a required class and a WBL placement. Scheduling challenges compound with transportation barriers when it comes to getting to and from WBL. Scheduling is the

second most commonly cited barrier after transportation.

"We're trying to get this employer to connect with kids. And he [the employer] is so amazing, he wants to participate, but every day is a new adventure on the email... And to think about it from our angle, we have 9:55 to 11:10. Random times. So that doesn't work for him, even though he wants to."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"Scheduling is a big one. I think there's scheduling in terms of the students' availability compared to the community partners. You know, like if I have a student working at the fire department, they cannot work, they cannot intern during a shift change, and that's sometimes when they're free."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

2. STAFFING AND COORDINATOR CAPACITY

PROBLEM: There are not enough WBL coordinators.

There are too few WBL coordinators to meet with all interested students, advertise their programs, get buy-in from administration, communicate with community partners, and do everything else they have to do in a day. They often have to do all of this with very few resources and in many cases as a part time responsibility. The only way to increase capacity is to add people who actively support the program, inside or outside of the school. No school interviewed had enough capacity to completely meet

student demand. A lack of capacity is a challenge that makes overcoming all the other barriers more difficult.

"Transportation is the biggest barrier people are willing to admit and coordinator capacity is actually the biggest barrier."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

"Capacity is the biggest barrier to WBL... We need larger departments in schools handling WBL and more people to manage the expansion. Other barriers, admin buy-in, transportation, can be overcome. Capacity can't, easily."

— Intermediary Organization in Vermont

"There's only so much time, right?... The struggle becomes making sure I get out and do all my visits... as work-based learning expands... just the allocation of time."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"In the beginning, it was all me — and that's not how it's supposed to be. The amount of work it takes to actually set up new WBL programs is a lot."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

PART TWO

Coordination and access to information

3. STUDENT AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS

PROBLEM: Nobody knows what work-based learning is (including students).

Many students don't know WBL is an option for them. It doesn't matter if a school offers WBL, if no one knows what it is or how to do it. A lack of student awareness is surprisingly common. Awareness is a challenge nationally as well. A Britebound report from 2022 found that only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of students were aware of the WBL opportunities for students their age.

"Student awareness is an issue... Students are saying they are unaware of the extent of options available."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"There is a lack of awareness and programs that expose students to options"

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"Students do it when opportunities are available and they are aware of the opportunities."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

When asked about awareness, coordinators often noted the importance of word of mouth and earlier exposure to WBL. WBL must be known well enough inside and outside of school to spread via word of mouth. Coordinators said that exposure as young as elementary school creates anticipation for WBL opportunities years before participating.

"Word of mouth to students from peers or parents is the most influential factor."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"Right off the bat, word of mouth is everything... kids talk and they talk across grade levels... they hear about it that way."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"Making students aware of these opportunities at a younger age is important."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

4. SILOED PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS AND STAKEHOLDERS

PROBLEM: Lack of communication between coordinators prevents best practices from being shared and causes duplicative work.

Desire for stronger networks

A professional network is an organized community of professionals. Formal and institutionalized networks have regular meeting times, shared resources, and procedures. Informal networks are relationships that exist organically between professionals, without a supporting structure.

There is a lack of formal, institutionalized networks. Most of the WBL professional networks in Vermont are informal. Successful WBL programs in other states often have formalized networks on both the state-wide and regional level (more on this in the following section). Many coordinators interviewed expressed a desire for broader and more structured peer connections.

"When I first started... there were things I got invited to and went to. I think it was the first two years. And then the pandemic hit and I haven't seen anything since."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"I would love it if it would expand to flexible pathways and people from around the state, maybe even other states... it would be great if Vermont would offer something like that."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

"Our county has strong ties... I'm not sure about the others"

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

Career and Technical Education (CTE) co-op coordinator networks

In Vermont, CTE co-op coordinators (co-ops are a kind of WBL where a student works for an employer) have a more formalized network. The network between CTE and PreK-12 coordinators can be limited outside of the certification classes provided by the Vermont Higher Education Collaborative.

"I do work-based learning in CTE. There are about 20 of us total and you attended one of our meetings... we have a very long, many years going email thread between us asking questions."

— CTE Co-op Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"Work-based learning coordinators — the bond that we have is different than any bond I've had... hey, here's my training agreement, what do you think, you want to use this? We share resources all the time."

— CTE Co-op Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"You're able to build relationships with other work-based learning coordinators during those classes... work-based learning is so open, there's not a rule book."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

Networks in Other States

When interviewing coordinators outside Vermont, there was lots of talk about state-wide and regional networks and the benefits of these networks. Below are perspectives from coordinators in other states on the impact of their networks. Strong networks are often viewed as critical components of success.

"When somebody new is hired, we connect with them quickly and say, what do you need?... sometimes they walk into somewhat of a dysfunctional [program]... We have a support group for her... within a year, they're pretty up to speed."

— Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Coordinator
from New Hampshire

"The connection between the coordinators is integral... they're continuously sharing ideas and contacts with each other. And because we are rural, we all share businesses. So it's really important for us to have a similar language across districts, rather than an internship that means five different things in five different schools."

— WBL Coordinator from Massachusetts

"The most successful [networks] include community partners and not just advisors."

— Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Coordinator from Maine

PART THREE

Incentives and Laws

5. WBL DOMAIN CONFUSION

PROBLEM: WBL is not always perceived by PreK-12 schools as being in their 'domain'.

Some PreK-12 coordinators expressed the feeling that the lack of guidance for work-based learning in PreK-12 schools relative to CTE centers makes them feel as though their WBL programs are less important than those in CTE. This gives the false impression that WBL "belongs" to CTE. There is more detailed guidance and laws for CTE centers regarding WBL than there is for PreK-12.

WBL has no dedicated state funding stream. Its description in The Flexible Pathways Initiative, Act 77, is brief compared to Dual Enrollment and Early

College. This has created the feeling of a lack of structure for some coordinators.

"There's this idea that work-based learning is for career centers... the K-12 schools feel like, well, this isn't really our domain... then funding as well, which is a real thing. And the concerns over whether students are going or not. And then... can students even get into the career center?"

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"Act 77 was the example of the unfunded mandate. Do more with no more money... the state could find more money or put more money towards it if they cared."

— Intermediary from Southern Vermont

6. LIABILITY & COMPLIANCE

PROBLEM: Complex regulations and labor laws create a barrier to offering WBL.

Managing liability and compliance is a barrier for WBL programs. Understanding and navigating labor law adds to the administrative burden on coordinators. CTE centers have slightly different rules on what they can and can't do when dealing with WBL placements in hazardous occupations. Additionally, labor laws restrict options for younger students.

"A lot of kids are coming in at 15 that want to work, but obviously there's so many regulations with safety and can't work till you're 16."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"Some of the intricacies of this job are harder than I thought... navigating some of the harder situations, either with AOE, with child labor laws... All the rules and regulations that go with public PreK-12 are different and kind of a pain, and dealing with minors all the time."

— CTE Co-op Coordinator from Northeast Vermont

"High schools have it much harder than I do [in CTE]... we have the hazardous occupation exemptions that we can get. They do not have those. They are trying to get students into unpaid internships... Co-op is all paid."

— CTE Co-op Coordinator from Central Vermont

"These are just electives right now. But... this needs to be more than just an elective... I feel like everyone should be part of this during their school."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"Teacher involvement is the key to giving students credit... Having more teachers involved is very important."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

"Crediting can also be seen as a potential threat by educators... a science teacher may feel threatened by the ability of a student to get science credit through FP, because their class and job become obsolete."

— Intermediary from Northwest Vermont

7. CREDIT FOR WBL

PROBLEM: Students rarely get awarded core credit for work-based learning.

WBL credits are nearly always electives. This barrier is important for two reasons:

1. A student faced with the option of choosing WBL or a required course is incentivized to take the course, because they need it to graduate, even if WBL is the better option for that student.
2. If the work a student is doing for the WBL requires baseline understanding of a subject matter to complete a job and they are successful in doing that job, they should receive credit for demonstrating understanding of that subject.

Educator involvement is necessary to award core credit. Making sure teachers have time and understanding of the value of WBL is the core of the challenge.

PART FOUR

School Culture and Student Voice

8. CULTURAL RESISTANCE

PROBLEM: When educators, school administrators, and district leaders resist the idea of WBL, programs will fail.

Administrative Support

WBL coordinators stress the importance of administrative support. Lack of administrative support can be a significant barrier to WBL implementation. Achieving buy-in is often a significant shift for the momentum of a WBL program.

"Administrative support at schools is still a barrier. Administrators who are still stuck in the traditional model for school make it difficult to work with when it comes to all Flexible Pathways. And legislators who believe in the traditional model of education as the right way."

— Intermediary from Central Vermont

"I do get a sense that people don't necessarily value it as intellectual or academic and rigorous. And that's a barrier... when you don't take something as seriously, it can reflect on what the output is."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"Very intentional hiring and administrative support is crucial. We have consistently gotten very strong support from the administration... Win over administration."

— Intermediary from Northeast Vermont

Educator Support

Resistance from educators is a frequently mentioned barrier. While not all educators are resistant to WBL, when they are it can add to the aforementioned barrier of awarding core academic credit for WBL and create cultural tension. There is a pattern of successful programs that achieve educator buy-in:

Educators feel that WBL could be a replacement for classroom instruction.



WBL ends up being additive, and classes are still full.



Students engaged in WBL become more engaged in class.



Educators become supportive of WBL.

"If you asked me back when I started, 'What's the biggest barrier?' I said it's the bargaining agreement with teachers... Totally different now... It's the ability to work with teachers, set up something that makes sense for everybody... we've really created that buy-in over the years."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"With that teaming, we've seen more success in our pathways, because the teachers are buying in more... because they're part of the process... In the beginning, not so much. I was on my own."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

Community Support

Some schools have even seen WBL become a requirement as a result of cultural acceptance. The educator buy-in pattern is similar for parents and community members. There is often an initial fear that WBL will harm outcomes, but the opposite often ends up being true.

"At first, when it started, parents thought it was a complete joke... And now it's different... There's a waitlist for the program."

— WBL Coordinator from the Northeast Kingdom

"Giving students autonomy is very important. One barrier is that students are not given enough autonomy in their learning in general."

— WBL Coordinator from Southern Vermont

"It used to be like a stigma. Kids that were doing work study... weren't the best students. It's not like that anymore. They have their own niche instead of being pariahs. This is a privilege that you have to earn... A lot of kids will come in as freshmen and say, 'I can't wait to do work study.'"

— Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Coordinator from Maine

"The whole point of the program is it's student driven. They come to us with an idea... I always say I have the best job in the building because mostly students come to me with an interest and want to pursue it. We listen to the kids... they make the ultimate decision, I just put them into positions to find out about things."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"I feel very lucky to be in this school district, because I know maybe not everyone has the same type of support from so many different levels."

— WBL Coordinator from Central Vermont

"To create an equitable WBL experience, schools need clarity, support, and agency. Fostering a student's desire to be successful on their own, for their own good."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

9. STUDENT VOICE AND AGENCY

PROBLEM: Students don't have enough voice or agency in their education.

Traditional education is not designed to give students agency and voice in their education. WBL coordinators strongly agree on the importance of incorporating student voice into program design. When students are given the opportunity to express what they want out of their education, they choose experiences like WBL.

"What do students want? Internships. They want to actually try those roles."

— WBL Coordinator from Northwest Vermont

FOUNDATIONAL BARRIER

Lack of Data

10. LACK OF DATA

PROBLEM: There is not enough data on WBL.

Stories of success can be influential enough to drive support for WBL. And there is no

shortage of success stories. However, higher level decisions are harder to justify based on anecdotal stories alone. The AOE collects data on schools that offer Flexible Pathways. This can include all Flexible Pathways and may not include WBL. This makes it difficult to understand the WBL landscape and make informed decisions about WBL.

The data barrier was explicitly named less frequently by practitioners, however it is one of the largest barriers to understanding for outsiders looking in. When people not immersed in the field want to learn about WBL they want to know things like what is offered, how many students do it, what types of jobs they do, what the outcomes are. These are difficult conversations when there is little data to give quantitatively backed answers.

Some schools collect internal data on WBL. This has been highly influential in generating WBL buy-in, but it is still difficult to compare across schools because each school collects different data in different ways. As a state, we cannot understand the impact of WBL if there is no standardized data collection. Whether WBL programs are incredibly beneficial, or have no impact at all, we won't know if we don't collect data.

WBL Outside of Vermont

Below are brief key takeaways from the WBL programs in eight states outside of Vermont and a summary of cross cutting takeaways from all states. The key takeaways from each state are limited to strategies relevant to Vermont's needs.

Colorado

- Colorado offered \$15M in tax credits to businesses participating in WBL

beginning in 2025. Colorado employers only took advantage of 10% of the credits because they were not easy to discover or take advantage of. This was attributed to employers not knowing about the tax credit and difficulty in claiming credits.

- Colorado will be funding intermediaries going forward to help small businesses take advantage of the credit.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Incentives must be clear and easy to claim. Intermediaries can support employers in taking advantage of incentives.

Louisiana

- In 2025, Louisiana consolidated its separate apprenticeship credit and youth jobs credit into a single Work-Based Learning Tax Credit (Act 376). Employers earn \$2.50 per hour worked, up to \$2,500 per worker per year, for apprentices, interns, and youth workers employed at least 100 hours. The credit took effect January 1, 2026, and sunsets at the end of 2031.
- The program cap starts at \$1 million and increases by \$1 million each year only if at least 80% of the prior year's credits were claimed, up to a maximum of \$7.5 million. This way, the incentive scales with demand.
- Louisiana funds the school side as well, providing \$1,000 per approved internship enrollment per term. Demand currently exceeds available funding, and enrollments are funded in the order they are received.
- The employer incentive was built alongside increased coordinator capacity.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Coordinator capacity is a precondition of the employer incentive. Caps tied to incentive usage allow a program to grow with demand. Employer incentives work well when paired with school-side funding. Louisiana's credit is too new to evaluate on outcomes, as the first claims will not be filed until 2027.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Pilot funding creates lasting programs when combined with strong systems development efforts. Paying student wages can greatly increase the number of participating employers. Rural vs. urban programs are similarly effective. Programs are beneficial to both students and employers. Many employers hire student participants.

Maine

- Maine offers WBL via Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs). The state began piloting ELOs with a \$25 million investment. At least five of the 26 pilot schools transitioned to funding full-time ELO coordinator positions. Schools that successfully transition to sustainable funding for ELOs received comprehensive systems development support provided by intermediaries.
- In the Maine pilot program, wages were paid to students by the program, not by employers. Sixty-six percent of employers surveyed said they wouldn't have participated if they had to pay wages themselves.
- Maine connected over 6,000 youth to over 8,000 pathways. Over 2,000 new business/community partnerships were developed. There was a balance between rural and urban participation and no meaningful difference in success rates.
- Over 80% of students saw positive impacts in quality of experience, skill development, and support/connection building. Employers were extremely positive about these experiences with 99% saying they would host again and 77% hiring at least one former participant.

Iowa

- Iowa requires data on WBL to be reported to school boards. In 2025, Iowa saw WBL participation in the graduating class increase from 45% to 76%. A total of 36,075 students participated in WBL experiences across 278 districts.
- Iowa provides dedicated funding for WBL coordinators across the state. It offers extra financial incentive to regions that share WBL coordinators. Iowa recognized that WBL is best organized regionally.
- A survey of businesses revealed that ~17% of businesses in Iowa were involved with a WBL program, but 63% of those without one were interested in having one. The majority of businesses also *disliked* project-based learning, registered/pre-apprenticeships, and teacher-led externships.
- Iowa's graduating class of 2026 was the first to receive industry credential seals on their diplomas.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Iowa values regional coordination over school-by-school coordination. There is strong demand for WBL programs from employers, who prefer WBL where students have more autonomy.

Massachusetts

- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education created the MyCAP (My Career and Academic Plan) framework for post-secondary readiness. As a part of MyCAP, Massachusetts created Innovation Career Pathways (ICPs) that operate like career tracks for high school students and include WBL.
- WBL in Massachusetts is supported by MassHire workforce development boards that represent counties. MassHire boards serve as intermediaries in WBL for high schools and employers. Massachusetts provides recurring funding for WBL distributed through the MassHire boards. In 2025 the state directed ~\$8.5 million to 120 schools and workforce partners, including \$6.3 million for "Connected Activities." They funded the supporting infrastructure directly: \$925,000 for MyCAP individualized career plans, \$500,000 for WBL planning and research, and \$300,000 for Career-Connected Learning development plans.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Strong state support and investment in tools and clear programs is effective. Institutionalized intermediaries are very helpful and can support WBL on the county level.

Wyoming

- Wyoming has introduced simulated work experience into its offerings for WBL. This is a way to combat the issues of transportation.
- The Wyoming model centers around supporting WBL coordinators within high schools rather than intermediaries.

- The state also pre-vets employer partners and maintains a list of compliant partners at the state level. These are ways of increasing coordinator capacity.
- Wyoming has a career exploration curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school students.
- Wyoming also reimburses employers up to 50% of student wages, for up to 50 hours per week.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Simulated work experiences can be a solution to transportation. Maintaining a list of pre-vetted employer partners is valuable for coordinators. Financial incentives help employers participate.

New Hampshire

- New Hampshire has had Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) since 2006. There are four foundational principles of ELOs:
 1. Research
 2. Reflection
 3. Product
 4. Presentation

These four principles give schools a standard for how to evaluate ELOs.

- Interviewees in New Hampshire described strong professional networks regionally and state-wide, often cited as an important factor of success by ELO coordinators.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Foundation principles help measure WBL rigor and create consistency. Both regional and state-wide professional networks are important.

Summary of Takeaways From Other States

Capacity Strategies

- Dedicated roles for WBL coordinators at high schools. The strongest state systems make the coordinator a condition of funding, not an optional role.
- Organize governance to align support and use common language and communication on state, district, and school level.
- Workplace simulations and virtual WBL can solve the transportation problem and have been adopted by more states since Covid.
- Shared standards, databases, and state-sponsored systems reduced the amount of work coordinators have to do.

Coordination and intermediaries

- The strongest programs are supported by intermediaries. Intermediaries are the single most cited solution in WBL academic and non-academic literature.
- Regional networks inside existing organizations build coordination capacity without creating new institutions.
- Developing internal systems and procedures for WBL in schools makes programs more likely to last, more efficient, and more resilient in the case of coordinator turnover.
- WBL is most effective when organized by region rather than isolated school by school.
- Regional and state-wide professional networks are highly beneficial for coordinators.

Incentives and Policy

- Financial incentives for employer participation are highly effective.

Several states have created financial incentives for WBL participation.

- Employer incentives work when paired with school-side funding, and caps tied to incentive usage let a program grow with demand.
- Temporary funding undermines the growth and development of programs and systems. A durable alternative is funding WBL through the school funding formula rather than grants.

Data

- Keep student data private, but outcomes transparent.
- Define WBL activity types in the statewide data system.

How to Build Successful WBL for Every Student in Vermont

The roadmap has ten recommendations. Each one responds to one of the ten barriers. Together they describe the conditions of a WBL ecosystem that works for every student in Vermont.

R1 Coordinate transportation regionally.

BARRIER 1: LOGISTICS: TRANSPORTATION & SCHEDULING

WHAT Coordinate transportation regionally through networks across schools, public transit, and community partners rather than school-by-school. Build scheduling flexibility centered around WBL and expand non-transportation-dependent options including simulated work environments, employer visits to schools, and virtual career-connected learning.

WHY *Transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to WBL, and it is a two-sided problem faced by schools and community partners alike. No single school can solve a regional problem alone. Regional intermediaries can create more opportunities to get students where they need to go*

R2 Fund a full-time WBL coordinator at every high school.

BARRIER 2: STAFFING AND COORDINATOR CAPACITY

WHAT Fund at least one full-time WBL coordinator at every school, with a standardized role description used statewide. Build systems and administrative support around the coordinator so programs are not dependent on a single person.

WHY *No school interviewed had enough capacity to meet student demand. In many schools WBL is only a part-time responsibility. Nearly every other barrier hinges on coordinator capacity.*

R3 Start career education earlier and celebrate WBL.

BARRIER 3: STUDENT AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS

WHAT Embed career-connected education opportunities starting in middle school or earlier, and treat awareness as an equity issue. Publicly celebrate WBL success so students and families know it exists and what it can do. Raise awareness with employers and community partners, so the whole ecosystem knows what WBL is and how to take part.

WHY *Word of mouth is the most influential factor in student awareness. Students without strong personal networks simply do not hear about WBL. Students who hear about WBL early have time to prepare and anticipate it before getting to high school.*

R4 Create a regional WBL intermediary in every county, connected by a statewide network.

BARRIER 4: SILOED PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

WHAT Fund at least one full-time intermediary per region, supporting both coordinators and employers, prioritizing under-served counties. Institutionalize a statewide and regional professional network including coordinators in both CTE & PreK-12, intermediaries, partners, administrators, higher education, and state agencies with funded time to participate.

WHY *The strongest programs are supported by intermediaries. In Maine, the pilot schools that kept their programs going were the ones that received systems-development support from intermediaries. PreK-12 and CTE coordinators serving students with similar needs may not be talking to each other.*

R5 Give updated guidance on WBL.

BARRIER 5: WBL DOMAIN CONFUSION

WHAT Provide clear statutory guidance: update state definitions for WBL in PreK-12 schools, so schools know what WBL is, who owns it, and how it differs from other pathways.

WHY *Some coordinators feel that WBL guidance in PreK-12 schools is lacking relative to that for CTE centers.*

R6 Make it easy for employers to participate.

BARRIER 6: LIABILITY & COMPLIANCE

WHAT Pre-vet compliant employers for WBL at the state level, maintained in a public statewide opportunity database. Include specific compliance and liability guidelines for WBL that can be easily followed or automated, so coordinators can focus on serving students. Pair this with financial incentives: offer tax credits or wage reimbursement to business partners of WBL, designed simply enough to actually be claimed.

WHY *Compliance uncertainty makes schools and employers hesitate even when both sides want the placement. A single trusted pool of pre-vetted partners removes duplicated legal work from every school in the state and increases the capacity of coordinators. Case studies in other states show that financial incentives encourage employer participation when they are easy to use.*

R7 Create a pathway to award core credit for WBL.

BARRIER 7: CREDIT FOR WBL

WHAT Establish clear statewide guidelines for evaluating WBL for core credit. Develop a framework and standards at the state level to assess the rigor of WBL. Bring educators into the WBL process as mentors and as partners in awarding credit.

WHY *WBL credits are nearly always electives, forcing students to choose between a placement and a course they need to graduate. Teacher involvement is the key to giving students credit for WBL.*

R8 Build educator and administrator buy-in through professional development.

BARRIER 8: CULTURAL RESISTANCE

WHAT Invest in WBL professional development for all professionals in the school, collect internal data on WBL outcomes, and build a school culture that publicly celebrates WBL as rigorous.

WHY *Resistance from educators is one of the biggest barriers to crediting WBL. Educators often see the value in WBL once they are exposed to student outcomes.*

R9 Design programs with students at the center.

BARRIER 9: STUDENT VOICE AND AGENCY

WHAT Build programs around student interests, let students co-direct their pathways, and create feedback loops so programs track real student needs. Build student schedules around WBL when applicable. Use PLPs (personalized learning plans) as intended for student-centered design.

WHY *When students are given a say in their education, they choose experiences like WBL. Programs designed without student voice solve problems students don't have.*

R10 Build the data foundation: measure, define, and map WBL statewide.

BARRIER 10: LACK OF DATA

WHAT A shared statewide system with three parts. Measure: standard participation and outcome metrics, collected across all districts and reported publicly. Define: shared definitions so WBL experiences mean the same thing across districts. Map: a state-certified database of opportunities, intermediaries, and stakeholder information.

WHY *The Agency of Education collects data on Flexible Pathways that may or may not include WBL. We can't evaluate, scale, or fund what we can't measure.*

What Can You Do?

ASK	WHY	WHEN
POLICY MAKERS		
Build the data foundation: a shared statewide system to measure, define, and map WBL.	The Agency of Education collects data on Flexible Pathways, which may not include WBL. The state's insights into WBL's efficacy is restricted by a lack of data in WBL.	IMMEDIATE
Provide funding for regional intermediaries that support both coordinators and employers, prioritizing under-served counties.	Schools in other states with the most successful work-based learning programs were the ones that received systems development support from intermediaries.	IMMEDIATE
Create financial incentives for schools to have WBL coordinator positions.	No school interviewed had enough capacity to meet student demand.	IMMEDIATE
Give updated statutory guidance: update definitions for WBL in PreK-12 schools.	Some coordinators feel that WBL guidance in PreK-12 schools is lacking relative to that for CTE centers.	IMMEDIATE
Create a pathway to award core credit for WBL, beyond the elective.	WBL credits are nearly always electives. Students have to choose between a WBL placement and a required course they need to graduate.	IMMEDIATE
Increase the ease of employer participation: build a public database of pre-vetted employers, and offer tax credits or wage reimbursement simple enough to be claimed.	Employers also face capacity barriers, difficult to claim credits are effectively designed not to be used.	AFTER INTERMEDIARIES ARE ESTABLISHED
EDUCATION LEADERS		
Organize transportation regionally.	Transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to WBL. No single school can solve a regional problem alone.	IMMEDIATE
Create flexibility in student schedules to prioritize work-based learning.	Rigid scheduling prevents students from taking full advantage of work-based learning.	IMMEDIATE
Fund and staff a full-time WBL coordinator if your school doesn't have one. A well-supported and elevated role.	Nearly all other barriers hinge on coordinator capacity.	IMMEDIATE

ASK	WHY	WHEN
Bring teachers into WBL as mentors and partners in awarding credit.	Teacher involvement is the key to giving students credit for WBL.	IMMEDIATE
Invest in professional development related to WBL for all professionals in your school.	Resistance from educators is one of the biggest barriers to crediting WBL.	IMMEDIATE
Use the PLP to put students at the center. Build programs around student interests and give them real agency in the process.	Coordinators said that when students are given a say in their education, they choose experiences like WBL. Student voice leads to more successful outcomes.	IMMEDIATE
Start career education earlier, in middle school, so a student's awareness doesn't depend on their family or network.	Word of mouth is the most influential factor in student awareness. Students without those networks do not hear about WBL.	AFTER COORDINATORS & INTERMEDIARIES ARE FUNDED
Build a school culture that publicly celebrates WBL and treats it as rigorous, not remedial.	WBL can carry a stigma in some schools. In schools where that changed, programs grew and developed waitlists.	IMMEDIATE
FUNDERS		
Fill the gaps state funding doesn't reach in creating intermediary programs.	The strongest programs are supported by intermediaries. Schools are unlikely to fund this out of existing budgets.	IMMEDIATE
Support the data infrastructure for WBL.	Vermont has limited data on WBL, and that gap underlies every other barrier.	IMMEDIATE
EMPLOYERS & COMMUNITY PARTNERS		
If you are interested in hosting WBL, find a local intermediary or WBL coordinator to reach out to.	Students want to work with you and there is support available to make it happen.	IMMEDIATE
Pay students if you can. If you do not have the ability to pay, don't let that stop you from making the connection. There may be funding available.	If you have the ability to pay, you are much more likely to attract and retain students. Paying also allows more resources to support businesses who can't pay, but can be valuable partners for students	IMMEDIATE
Help solve transportation by going on school visits. Not all WBL has to be internships or paid work experience.	Transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to WBL. It is a two-sided problem faced by schools and community partners.	IMMEDIATE

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