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# A Path to Economic Opportunity for America's Young People

A Call for Policymakers to Expand Work-Based  
Learning in Challenging Times





## Convergence of Crises

As national and state legislators seek to address the fallout from multiple crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential they consider the effects on current high school students and young people launching their careers in the coming years. These effects are compounded for young people of color and for those who are navigating these challenges within inequitable and discriminatory education and workforce systems. If policymakers do not act quickly, this convergence of crises will have serious and long-lasting impacts on this generation. Work-based learning is a proven strategy for supporting economic mobility, and now is the time to act.

**Economic upheaval brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is and will continue to negatively affect:**



Young people who are entering the workforce.<sup>1</sup>



School districts that will face significant budget cuts.<sup>2</sup>



Communities that need an experienced talent pipeline to aid in recovery.<sup>3</sup>



**These crises are likely to be further exacerbated for people of color and people from low-income communities, as racism and systemic inequities magnify the outcomes we've seen from past recessions, such as:**



Lower earnings, less wealth, and greater detriments to personal well-being.<sup>4</sup>



Greater budget cuts faced by high-poverty school districts.<sup>5</sup>



Greater economic consequences and instability.<sup>6,7</sup>

Young people deserve an education that builds their workforce-ready skills, helps them create social capital, and connects them to opportunity in “normal” economic times, and these experiences are even more critical during a downturn. For our economy to recover, future workers need equal opportunity and access to the skills training to meet present-day workforce demands and future challenges and opportunities. This not only benefits students—it advances our communities and the nation.

**Policymakers should invest in work-based learning programs so workers of the future have the skills they need to succeed, and employers of tomorrow have the diverse talent they need to thrive.**

**78%**

of likely voters support government incentives for businesses to provide internships or career prep experiences.<sup>8</sup>

**75%**

of likely voters believe students who participate in career preparation programs will be more successful in their careers.<sup>8</sup>

## Work-Based Learning

A proven solution to increasing earnings and career stability is work-based learning. Work-based learning is the continuum of activities both in classroom learning and the actual workplace setting that leads students to gain real world experience. It also has proven economic benefits for Black and Latinx students and young people from families with low incomes. Through work-based learning, even virtually amid a pandemic, students can better identify their career interests and aptitudes, understand the education and training they need to achieve their aspirations, and build their professional and support networks.

Students have the opportunity to apply academic and technical knowledge while fostering workforce-ready skills such as working in teams, problem solving, and critical thinking. These are the skills that students need to succeed in college and life and that companies need from their employees starting on day one. These are also skills and experiences that pay off.



**Getting a job** – 89% of employers said students with high school internships had a competitive advantage when applying for a college internship or a full-time job.<sup>9</sup>



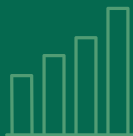
**Earnings** – Students who graduated from a career academy earned 11% more total earnings over the eight years following high school than those who did not attend a career academy. Black and Hispanic students attending NAF academies are also shown to have higher high school graduation rates. Youth who drop out of high school can expect to earn \$10,000 less annually compared to high school graduates.<sup>10,11</sup>



**Determining a career path** – Students who studied in a career academy were more likely to be working in a job that was directly related to the subjects and themes they studied in high school. 46% of career academy graduates reported their current choice of occupational field was influenced by their high school experience compared to non-academy students.<sup>12</sup>



**Recognizing job quality** – Participating in work-based learning during high school helps students secure higher-quality jobs with better wages, benefits, hours, and job satisfaction. Workers in jobs that require high-cognitive or soft skills experienced less unemployment, especially during recessions.<sup>13,14</sup>



**Closing the gap** – 21% of Black workers have jobs with lower wages and benefits compared with 13% of white and Latinx workers, but this gap disappears when researchers control for education, training, work experience, and other characteristics. This shows that interventions such as work-based learning can contribute to closing the gap for students when racial and class inequities are also addressed.<sup>15</sup>



**Building professional networks** – 80% of jobs are filled through personal and professional connections. Work-based learning helps students build these relationships and expand their networks beyond their immediate communities. The relationships with adults nurtured through work-based learning opportunities are also shown to be long-lasting, positively benefiting students up to a decade later.<sup>16,17</sup>

Work-based learning is advantageous for employers and businesses. It is a proven way to grow the talent pipeline and help students be ready for the workforce. Paid internships in particular help to fill the gap between jobs available and the people with the skills to fill them. By partnering with high schools to provide work-based learning opportunities to students, businesses help develop a talent pipeline aligned with their workforce needs. This also gives businesses the opportunity to observe prospective employees in action before making the investment to hire them.<sup>18</sup> Connecting businesses with the workers they need is essential for the recovery of our local and regional economies and for building resilience in a fast-changing world.

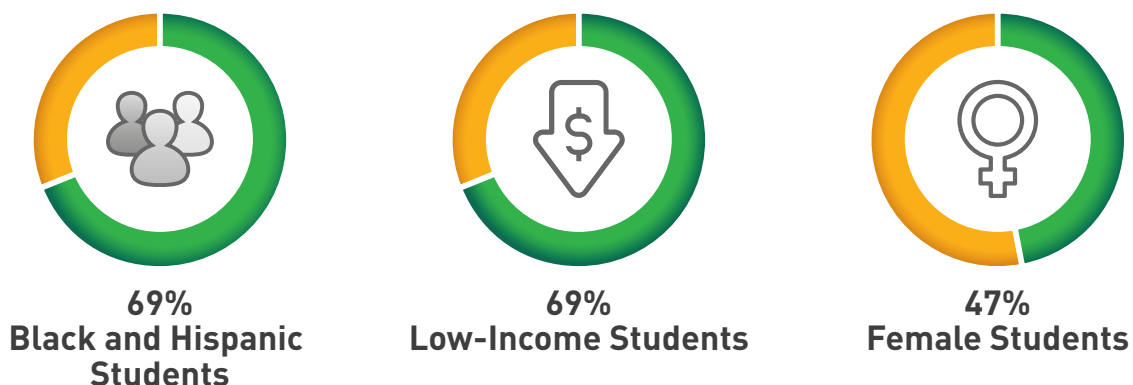
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The value proposition for schools, students, communities, businesses, industries, and those elected to lead is clear. A modest investment in work-based learning yields significant dividends; it is the kind of smart, forward-thinking, strategic step lawmakers and communities must make to help future workers and our communities withstand challenging economic times.

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## How It Works

The infrastructure is already in place to institute work-based learning practices in high schools across the country. NAF is a national network of education, business, and community leaders who work together to ensure high school students are college, career, and future ready. Since 1980, NAF has been partnering with communities to improve outcomes for students by implementing NAF career academies – small learning communities within existing high schools. NAF’s educational design amplifies students’ passion for learning and gives businesses the opportunity to shape America’s workforce by transforming the learning environment to include STEM-infused, industry-specific curricula and work-based learning experiences. NAF serves more than 100,000 students in 34 states, plus D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NAF is focused on helping to eliminate systemic, educational, and professional barriers faced by students of color. As of 2019, NAF students are:



## NAF's Approach



We work with high schools to ensure students take career-relevant courses aligned with work-based learning experiences to develop future ready skills and accelerate their career paths.



We help schools create partnerships with businesses to provide access to career-building opportunities.



We support businesses in playing an active role in shaping the future workforce.

NAF academies focus on some of our country's most in-demand industries including health sciences, engineering, and information technology. Through NAF academies, students are connected with employers in their communities, strengthening the overall viability of local economies.

Employers small and large have proven that delivering quality work-based learning opportunities during a pandemic is possible. Businesses and schools across the country have collaborated in new ways to provide safe, virtual learning opportunities for students. These partnerships have sparked innovation and uncovered alternative methods of driving equity and providing more access to young people who might otherwise be marginalized due to obstacles such as transportation. The hard and soft skills that students acquire through these learning experiences prepare them to adapt and meet new challenges posed by the current crises.

### Through work-based learning, Miami-Dade is increasing equity

Miami-Dade County government, The Children's Trust, and Miami-Dade County Public Schools teamed up to provide summer internships as part of their career and technical education programs. The program serves students who have been systemically discriminated against, students who may be transitioning out of foster care, and students with disabilities. In addition to the internship, students receive a stipend and earn course credits. More than 3,000 students worked at paid internships through the program in 2019. Knowing many of their families were impacted by furloughs and company closures due to COVID-19, it was crucial to place high school students into paid internships during the summer of 2020 so they could contribute to their families' income. The program helped place 1,342 remote, 210 hybrid, and 520 onsite qualified high school student interns into 599 different companies who served as internship hosts. Over 1,500 of these interns were NAF academy students. The internship was also an economic booster in the community. During the pandemic, the initiative helped keep small businesses afloat.



**The Congressional Research Service** data shows, in 2018, youth in families below the poverty line contributed 26% of their families' income, compared to 9% for youth in families at four times the poverty line or above. With greater unemployment and less opportunities for youth, poor families where youth contribute more to their families' incomes may face even greater financial hardships.<sup>21</sup>



“ We were able to collaborate with professionals from around the country. That likely would not have happened if we were working onsite and COVID-19 was not happening. Working with a mentor from Florida (where I am from) and another from Arizona broadened my perspective and gave me insights outside my own state. Plus, it helped me figure out how to coordinate meetings and check-ins across different time zones. ”

### **NAF is filling the gap during difficult times**

As the COVID-19 pandemic worsened in 2020, NAF recognized that student access to in-person internships would be limited. In response, NAF developed a three-week paid virtual professional experience for students. The NAF Career Readiness Experience (CRE) allowed students to build on their NAF academy experiences with support from professionals in their communities. The program focused on building proficiency in project management, professional networking and collaboration, communication and presentations, and fundamental technology applications. Each student invited a mentor(s) from their community to support their participation so that even with the virtual, group-based nature of the project, students were able to build their professional networks and complete the program with an additional adult(s) invested in their success. Going forward, this virtual model has great promise for delivering opportunities to rural students and removing transportation barriers that limit participation in many urban areas. NAF open-sourced their virtual internship guides and resources, developed based on their work with corporate partners in the virtual internship space, to benefit more students and communities.

### **Employers are building social capital, virtually**

When its offices shut down, Lenovo quickly pivoted its annual internship program to offer 90 virtual internships to students and recent graduates, including NAF academy students. Lenovo interns learned core components of the company's work—from engineering to human resources—in a safe yet engaging way. Interns stayed connected with mentors and networked virtually. Some interns were so inspired by the experience that they applied what they learned to virtual volunteerism. One group of interns helped deliver programming and activities to pediatric patients, which was a big help given that hospital visitors were limited due to COVID-19.

## What You Can Do

Let's get going. We need state and federal-level policy support to protect our students, schools, workforce, and economies. Policymakers should consider:

- Allocating public resources to support work-based learning opportunities for high school students, with a particular focus on students in communities with systemic underinvestment.
- Supporting paid work-based learning opportunities, such as internships, and encouraging businesses and communities to offer these opportunities to local students.
- Teaming with business groups, school districts, and state, local, and regional job planning organizations to incorporate high school career pathways, including NAF academies, into their core plans.
- Creating incentives for businesses to participate in work-based learning programs and better align talent pipelines within high-demand, high-wage jobs.



**Connecticut** implemented an Apprenticeship and Subsidized Training and Employment Program to assist small businesses and manufacturers in hiring high school and college students, and, among other things, offers on-the-job training and wage subsidies for new apprentices.<sup>22</sup>



**Iowa, Missouri, and South Carolina**, among other states, implemented tax credits for businesses that engage in work-based learning for high school students. These tax credits not only energize efforts statewide, they help businesses cover the cost of the programs and provide a financial incentive for more employers—big and small—to hire young people.<sup>23,24,25</sup>

Though our world is changing rapidly, and we face unprecedented challenges, we have an opportunity to pave the way for a stronger and more equitable economy. We need a workforce that can meet these extraordinary challenges and help businesses continue to innovate. Work-based learning, including paid internships, is a proven, effective way to ensure high school students are future ready and prepared to meet the demands of an evolving economy. Prioritizing work-based learning will help businesses recruit and retain skilled workers, empower students to build successful careers, and help our communities recover and thrive.



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## Resources [All links were accessed between July 1 and November 1, 2020]

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