

Work-Based Learning Coordinators

An Essential Role for Students' Career Preparedness & Success



Over the past decade, states and the federal government have enacted a number of policies and made substantial investments in work-based learning (WBL) for high school students. Over 33 states have enacted formal definitions of work-based learning,¹ federal law (Perkins V) lists work-based learning as a program quality indicator,² and over 27 states measure whether students participate in WBL.³

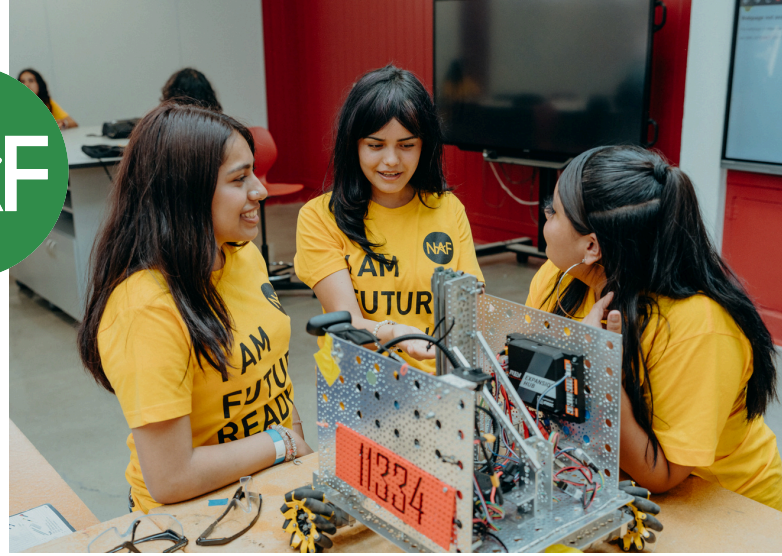
Despite this increased focus on WBL policy and accountability measures, it remains one of education's most unevenly distributed resources. A crucial element of successful implementation of work-based learning, yet one that is missing from most high schools, is a **Work-Based Learning Coordinator**. When schools lack a dedicated staff member responsible for building employer relationships, coordinating work-based learning experiences, and ensuring every interested student can access them, students miss out on life-changing opportunities. This staffing issue can be addressed with policy solutions that will positively impact millions of students.

Very few states have formalized the WBL Coordinator role, with most leaving it up to districts or high school staff. This is despite the fact the [U.S. DOE WBL Toolkit](#) highlights the importance of WBL coordinator support,⁴ and a [Britebound and Bellwether](#) analysis found that "States need additional staff and tools to support students and businesses to navigate work-based learning programs and forge connections."⁵

Work-Based Learning Definition

“Sustained interactions with industry or community professionals in real workplace settings, to the extent practicable, or simulated environments at an education institution that foster in-depth, firsthand engagement with the tasks required in a given career field, that are aligned to curriculum and instruction.”

Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)



What Work-Based Learning Coordinators Do

While titles for these roles vary, the core responsibilities of a WBL Coordinator include:



Building employer/partner relationships

WBL Coordinators serve as the primary bridge between schools and local employers, industry partners, and companies and organizations. Having a person dedicated to strategic relationship building results in more WBL opportunities for students and a robust pipeline of qualified candidates for employer partners.



Planning and implementing WBL opportunities for students

WBL Coordinators translate employer partnerships into meaningful student experiences across the continuum of career awareness, exploration, and preparation. The time and attention this can take, especially for large-scale events, is extremely difficult for teachers and counselors to absorb given their responsibilities.



Tracking data and program quality to ensure continuous improvement

WBL Coordinators ensure that experiences are documented, evaluated, and improved over time. This includes collecting data on student participation, employer feedback, and outcomes to meet state and federal accountability requirements, including Perkins V quality indicators.

WBL Coordinator Best Practices from the NAF Network

WBL Coordinators work closely with educators, Advisory Board members, and district leaders on partnership building, WBL activity planning and implementation, and data tracking/analysis. This collaborative approach leads to stronger student outcomes. The following examples highlight select initiatives:



Birmingham City Schools (AL)

20 NAF academies in 7 high schools

2024-25: 1,184 students completed 19,753 WBL hours

WBL staff structure: Full-time Career Academy Leads in each high school plus district-level staff

Best practice: Offering multi-academy WBL activities including leadership development conferences, college and career fairs, Dress for Success workshops, and mock interviews. Growing the pipeline of future students through events for 8th graders such as the CTE and Career Academies Extravaganza, highlighting programs offered in BCS for over 1,400 8th graders.



Broward County Public Schools (FL)

13 NAF academies in 6 high schools

2024-25: 949 students completed 9,441 WBL hours

WBL staff structure: School-based Career & Technical Education (CTE) Advisors; district CTE supervisors

Best practice: Collaboration with a newly refreshed districtwide Advisory Board has strengthened cross-industry engagement; creation of CTE Advisor roles, focused specifically on internship preparation, WBL coordination, and partner recruitment, has expanded the district's capacity to provide WBL activities and build sustainable, high-quality industry partnerships.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (FL)

80 NAF academies in 32 high schools

2024-25: 14,652 students completed 400,892 WBL hours

WBL staff structure: District-level WBL Coordinators who work with each

Best practice: Provide pathway-level support by facilitating WBL activity planning and implementation (including for large-scale events like a conference for 1,300+ students), partner engagement, and structured student reflection across multiple industry sectors such as Agriculture/Arts/Education, Business & Finance, Culinary Arts/Hospitality & Tourism, Engineering, Health Science, and Information Technology.



East Baton Rouge Parish School System (LA)

4 NAF academies in Scotlandville Magnet High School

2024-25: 585 students completed 5,608 WBL hours

WBL staff structure: Full-time Magnet Site Coordinator

Best practice: Ensures breadth and depth of WBL experiences for students in Engineering, Business, Information Technology, and Healthcare pathways. Activity highlights include a Career Pathway Week, STEM Day, extensive worksite tours and job shadowing, resume reviews and mock interviews, and mentoring. Students pursue internships as early as 10th grade and all students graduate having completed internships.



Milwaukee Public Schools (WI)

18 NAF academies in 9 high schools

2024-25: 1,200 students completed 5,364 WBL hours

WBL staff structure: District-level WBL and Internship Coordinator, district-level WBL specialists who support individual schools

Best practice: Piloted and implemented NAF's WBL Tracking tools, continuing to expand usage across the district, and collaborating with the NAF Tech team on student data fidelity. This has led to continuous improvement of WBL in the district, including expanding student WBL opportunities. This approach is now under consideration for state-wide adoption.



Just as every school has a principal and a counselor, effective work-based learning requires a dedicated coordinator. When this role is missing, opportunity gaps widen; when it is present, students gain clarity, confidence, and real-world readiness.”

Angela Lee Smith, Ed.S.
Program Specialist
Birmingham City Schools



My ultimate goal is to serve as the link between education and industry ensuring students graduate not only with academic knowledge, but also with the experience, professional skills, and industry connections necessary to succeed in college, careers, and beyond.”

Carol Anderson
Magnet Site Coordinator
Scotlandville Magnet High School

Policy Recommendations

Work-based learning is a transformative experience for students, helping them decide on careers of interest, develop durable skills, and build their professional network. Allocating resources and supports for dedicated professionals to build local partnerships, coordinate WBL opportunities, and track outcomes data will better position schools to set young people up for success during and after high school.

- **Provide direct funding or competitive grant programs to fund WBL Coordinator positions**, particularly in districts that are rural and lack access to opportunity. An assessment can be included in a grant program to evaluate WBL opportunities completed and students post-secondary career plans.
- **States can issue guidance explicitly naming WBL Coordinator positions as an allowable and encouraged use of Perkins funds.** Guidance can include what the role entails and qualifications it requires.
- **Tie WBL program quality standards to WBL Coordinator presence.** States that have selected WBL as a Perkins quality indicator should include coordinator capacity in how they assess program quality.



Work-Based Learning Coordinators change lives! Coordinators find work-based learning opportunities for students to test, to try, to experiment, to learn from, and most of all, for students to gain skills that will allow them to adapt, be flexible, communicate, and become someone they are proud of. Work-based learning is the bridge between core content and real life.”

Emily Brown
Internship Coordinator
Milwaukee Public Schools

About NAF

NAF is a national leader in career-connected education that expands access to real-world learning opportunities for high school students. Academies connect students to industry and hands-on learning that align with the workforce needs within their community. Many NAF academies have dedicated Work-Based Learning Coordinators.

For questions, please contact



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1 & 3 Whinnery, E., Bloomquist, L., Kelly, T., and Perez Jr, Z. 50-State Comparison: Work-Based Learning. Education Commission of the States. <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-work-based-learning/>.

2 Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), Public Law No: 115-224, Enacted July 31, 2018.

4 U.S. Department of Education Work-Based Learning Toolkit. <https://cte.ed.gov/wbltoolkit/>.

5 Making it work: Ten stories of promise and progress in high school work-based learning. Britebound. <https://www.britebound.org/insights/making-it-work-report>.