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Prepared By: Jessica Hathaway, LESC

Witness: Jessica Hathaway, Senior Policy Analyst II, LESC; Tony Monfiletto, Director, Future Focused Education; Deborah Good, Director of Organizational Learning and Research; Alvin Warren, Vice President of Career Pathways and Advocacy, LANL Foundation; Hilario Chavez, Superintendent, Santa Fe Public Schools; Jose Villarreal, Work-Based Learning Coordinator, Santa Fe Public Schools; Lutz Arnhold, Managing Director, Rosewood Inn of the Anasazi

Work-Based Learning and Student Internships

Connecting education and training to workforce needs—and ensuring learners have access to experiences that develop academic, social, and civic readiness—is an economic imperative. Forces such as globalization and technological advancement have transformed the labor market and economy, increased the value and importance of postsecondary education, and placed new demands on our country’s education system to prepare learners for a rapidly changing world of work.

These structural changes in the labor market and economy have also caused employers to shift from valuing strictly physical competencies that supported the American economy during its industrial revolution and instead, look for attributes such as critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

As education systems grapple with how to meet the demands of today’s labor market, activities that promote hands-on student learning are becoming more prevalent. At a state policy level, work-based learning is increasingly being used to ensure access to learning activities that foster the kind of complex skill development students need to succeed in career, postsecondary, and civic environments of today.

What is Work-Based Learning?

Work-based learning is related to career technical education (CTE), but is a distinct concept. It is often understood as an umbrella term for a variety of activities that represent the integration of workplace experiences with either traditional academic or CTE learning curriculums. Work-based learning is an educational approach in which students complete meaningful tasks either connected to, or in, workplace settings. Such learning happens when students participate in real-life work environments, gaining career experience and applying classroom knowledge and skills in an environment with actual employers as part of the learning experience.

While many definitions of work-based learning exist, federal [law](#) defines it as “sustained interactions with industry or community professionals in real workplace settings, to the extent practicable, or simulated environments at an educational institution that foster in-depth, firsthand

Key Takeaways

Work-based learning—related to career technical education (CTE) but a distinct concept—is an umbrella term for a variety of activities that represent the integration of workplace experiences with a CTE curriculum.

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Young adults today are taking longer—until their early 30s—to land in “good jobs” as compared with generations past.

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Quality work-based learning connects classroom experiences to careers, supports the economic development, and allows students to gain hands-on experiences.

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Work-based learning exists on a continuum and includes a range of activities from career exploration to career learning.

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Work-based learning is an umbrella term for a variety of activities that integrate workplace experiences with classroom curriculums.

engagement with the tasks required in a given career field, that are aligned to curriculum and instruction.”

Further, work-based learning is defined in New Mexico’s administrative code as “activities that develop work place skills such as tours, job shadowing, work experience rotations, mentoring, entrepreneurships, service learning, internships, co-ops, or youth pre-apprenticeships aligned with a registered apprenticeship program under the New Mexico department of workforce solutions.” See [NMAC 6.30.13.7](#).

Why Work-Based Learning?

Work-based learning is an evidence-based strategy that helps young people gain occupational and career skills, apply classroom learning in a practical, on-the-job context, and better prepare for today’s labor market demands. When implemented in a high-quality manner, work-based learning has the potential to ready students for career experiences, help students earn industry credentials while in high school, build interpersonal and technical skills, and engage students in their learning environment.

Work-Based Learning in Federal Legislation

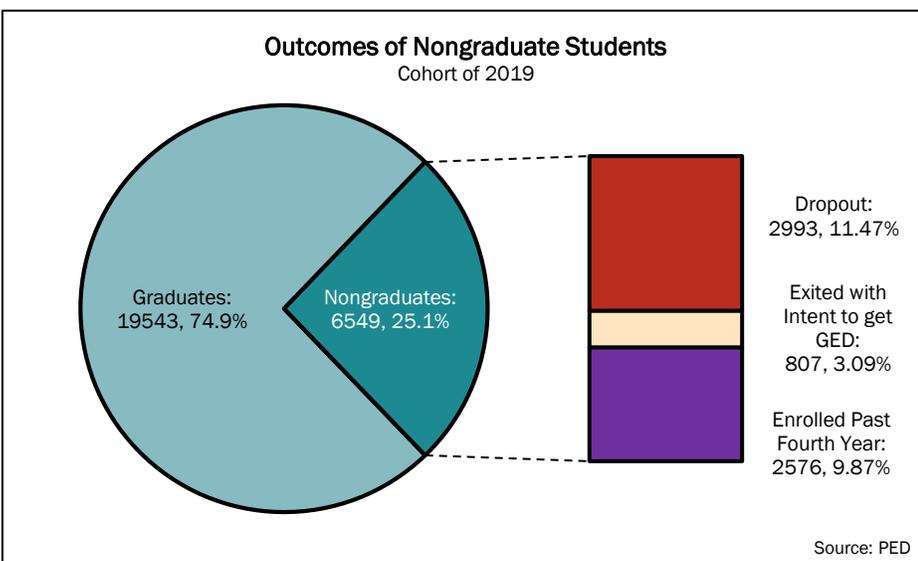
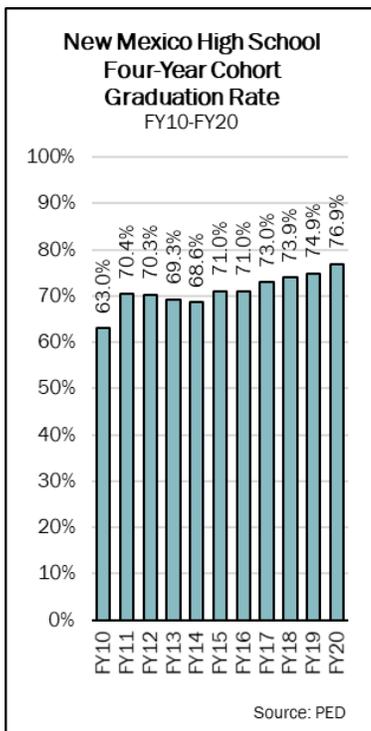
While work-based learning is not a new concept, it has seen a resurgence in recent years. Nationally, high schools have moved from a “college for all” perspective to a broader vision that encompasses college, career, and civic readiness. Additionally, work-based learning is also emphasized in multiple pieces of federal legislation: the most recent authorization of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). As the federal government has signaled reinvestment in work-based learning and career and technical

education, states have responded by expanding work-based learning programs in schools.

Effects on Employment of Young Adults

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce recently published [research](#) that shows it is taking young adults today longer to attain a “good job” than young adults in generations past. The Center defines a good job as one that pays at least \$35,000

annually (adjusted for cost of living, with a national average of \$57,000 annually), and also reports it is taking most young adults until their early 30s to gain such employment. In comparison, more than half of older millenials had a good job by age 30. For baby boomers,



this was by age 27. Young workers who do not successfully find a good job by their mid 30s are more likely to be in a chronically worse financial position than prior generations. Research from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that for the average worker, most earning growth occurs between the ages 25 and 35.

Work-based learning can be a promising investment to boost employment potential of young workers. The Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce research shows good job attainment is slowed by three primary factors:

1. The rising cost of postsecondary education;
2. Limited access to **high-quality work-based learning**; and
3. The absence of comprehensive counseling and career navigation services.

In addition, work-based learning is a strategy that can improve engagement with school by providing students with relevant experiences. National research shows 19.6 percent of youth—or 47,900 young adults—in New Mexico are [disconnected](#). Disconnected youth are defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not working. The national average is 12.6 percent.

Quality work-based learning connects learners’ classroom experiences to future careers, supports the development of state, regional, and local economies by ensuring education systems are meeting the needs of employers in their community, and allows students to gain hands-on experiences that further applied learning earlier in life.

In New Mexico, 19.6 percent of young adults ages 16 through 24 are “disconnected” — meaning they are not in school and not working. The national average is 12.6 percent.

Continuum of Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning activities generally fall along a continuum with increasing intensity as students progress in grade level and learning. The most common beginning stages of work-based learning include activities that foster career awareness and exploration. At the latter end of the continuum, work-based learning becomes more complex, with students engaging in actual career preparation and training in a workplace setting.

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[Research](#) from Advance CTE, a national nonprofit that represents state career technical education directors and state leaders, and the Education Strategy Group, a consulting firm that works with education and workforce leaders, shows common work-based learning continuums include the following:

- **Career Awareness:** Students learn *about* work. Career awareness activities include field trips, career days, career fairs, and completion of interest inventories as learners gain awareness about career and postsecondary options. Career awareness activities are generally about building knowledge and do not take place in workplaces. At this stage, students are preparing for engaging in work-based learning.
- **Career Exploration and Exposure:** Students continue learning *about* work by engaging in more progressive career exploration. This includes activities such as job shadowing, mentorships, company tours, informational interviews, mentoring relationships, and workplace simulations. Students may spend time at workplaces

for short periods with a primary goal of gaining introductory information about an industry.

- **Career Preparation:** Students learn *through* work. Career preparation includes training programs, student-led—or school-based—enterprise, service learning, pre-apprenticeships or apprenticeship readiness courses, cooperative education, and simulated work experiences that help learners develop knowledge and core competencies necessary for success in careers and postsecondary education. This is about the practical application of learning *to* work.
- **Career Training or Experience:** Students are learning *for* work. At the most intensive end of the work-based learning continuum, learners engage in work experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and work-based courses. These experiences are intended to train learners for employment and if needed, postsecondary education.

While these activities represent a wide range of learner experiences, this is intentional in work-based learning design. Some programs are designed to be focused more on career awareness, while others are designed to engage students in long-term internships. [Research](#) from the Aspen Institute notes contextual factors such as funding, industry regulations, employer capacity, and economic conditions influence the types of work-based learning opportunities available to learners. While this means programs look quite different, it simply represents the continuum of activities.

New Mexico Summer Enrichment Internship Program

The College and Career Readiness Bureau at PED is in its second year of offering a [summer enrichment internship program](#) for high school students statewide. Launched in 2021 using \$9.89 million in federal pandemic relief funds, this program provides high school students with the opportunity to participate in internships with government agencies including county, tribal, pueblo, nation, or municipal placements. The program was designed to engage students in internships and work-based learning following pandemic interruptions to learning.

In 2021, 1,304 students from 26 counties, tribes, pueblos, or nations participated in the program. Over 300 community partners from participating counties were also involved as employers for the student internships. Internships are 20 hours a week for six weeks, and interns are paid \$12 an hour, or the minimum wage of the area if greater. [Doña Ana County](#) was especially involved in 2021, finding placements for over 500 students across the county in private, public, and nonprofit sector placements spanning multiple types of work.

PED launched the program again for the summer of 2022. Preliminary data from PED indicates that roughly 2,000 students are participating in the internships this summer. Because this program is funded with federal relief funds, it is unclear if this program will be available in future years.

State Policy and Budget Considerations

As research continues to show the importance of work-based learning as part of student learning that integrates career technical education (CTE) curriculum and hands-on work experiences, the Legislature and education stakeholders should target efforts and investments to ensure CTE is supported.

High-quality work-based learning not only requires investment from students, educators, employers, but also structures and resources that are aligned to support this type of learning. Students must be empowered to engage meaningfully with offered work-based learning experiences. Educators must be supported with how to link the experiences students are having to the classroom as well as work with employers and their communities. Employers must be engaged and understand students' classroom curriculum while also setting clear expectations for student success.

Consider defining work-based learning in statute. While work-based learning is defined in administrative code, it is not defined in

state statute. Sufficiently detailed definitions of work-based learning helps schools understand what can be offered to students and for students to know what experiences may be available to them. While administrative code does address the term, defining the concept in statute may further incorporate work-based learning into statutory graduation requirements.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career-technical education. • Increasing the secondary factor in the state equalization guarantee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise high school graduation statute to update graduation requirements and ensure options such as work-based learning are clearly defined and able to be counted as part of credits earned towards high school graduation. • Increase secondary factor as a way to ensure adequate resources for services needed to engage and serve students in school settings—such as work-based learning—that are preparing them for a job market that is rapidly shifting.

Study feasibility of financial incentives for employers that offer work-based learning opportunities. New Mexico does offer a [Job Mentorship Tax Credit](#), which provides a tax credit to businesses that hire students in a school-sanctioned, career-preparation education program—including work-based learning. It is unclear how widely used this tax credit is. Policy changes that either increase financial incentives or allow for incentives for employers participating in all types of work-based learning could encourage additional activities across the continuum of work-based learning offerings.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career-technical education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess job mentorship tax credit to determine if the tax credit is adequately encouraging work-based learning and career technical education offerings for students.

Reengage students. A significant percentage of young adults in New Mexico—19.6 percent—are considered disconnected. Further, a LESC staff brief presented to the LESC in July 2022 found that the percentage of students “chronically absent,” defined as missing 10 percent of the school year or more for any reason, grew to 30 percent during the pandemic. Students must be engaged for learning to be effective. Reengaging students and making sure education is culturally and linguistically relevant, as well as aligned to each student’s individual goals after high school, is imperative to connect students with learning.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally and Linguistically responsive instruction. • Career-technical education. • Increasing the at-risk factor and the secondary factor in the state equalization guarantee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise New Mexico’s graduation requirements to reflect the skills students want from education and the pathways students choose after graduation. • Create a broader definition of “school directed program” that incentivizes schools to pursue innovative and engaging teaching styles like project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and career technical education. • Increase secondary and at-risk factors as a way to ensure adequate resources for services needed to engage and serve students in school settings that are preparing them for a job market that is rapidly shifting.

Support high-quality CTE and ensure adequate resources. As interest in offering career technical education increases, ensuring adequate resources for the programmatic, staffing, and development of such learning is necessary to ensure students can access these offerings.

Relevant Budget Line Items:	Relevant Policy Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career-technical education (CTE) programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise New Mexico’s graduation requirements to ensure students can participate in CTE programs, gain the skills they want from their education, and pursue a variety of pathways after high school graduation.

Relevant Budget Line Items, continued:	Relevant Policy Considerations, continued:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career technical education (CTE) facilities. • Increasing the secondary factor in the state equalization guarantee. • Increasing funding for programs supporting science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts and charter schools have noted a need for increased funding for CTE-related capital outlay needs, particularly program start-up, facility, and equipment costs. Consider appropriating funds to the Public School Facilities Authority (PSFA) to distribute funds or establish an annual facility initiative with a set amount of funding for CTE projects. • Increase secondary factor as a way to ensure adequate resources for services needed to engage and serve students in school settings—such as work-based learning—that are preparing them for a job market that is rapidly shifting. • Revise New Mexico’s graduation requirements to afford students relevant and engaging pathways into STEAM fields, like statistics, computer science, financial literacy, career-related mathematics, and other relevant courses.