



# Creating a Responsive and Sustainable Statewide Work-Based Learning Structure

## A Reference Guide

The COVID-19 pandemic forced state education and workforce systems to quickly adapt to urgent and novel health and economic crises. Governors have been increasingly supportive of work-based learning, a workforce training strategy that connects classroom learning with on-the-job experience. Work-based learning faced significant challenges in maintaining continuity due to the abrupt shift to a virtual environment and widespread business closures, but states with strong statewide work-based learning structures were able to pivot in a nimble, coordinated way to face these new challenges. The pandemic has highlighted how important a resilient state work-based learning structure is, not only to ensure students have access to a range of high-quality learning and career options, but also to mobilize and adapt these efforts during times of economic disruption. It is also critical that work-based learning structures can adapt to support a stronger and more equitable recovery. The components that allowed states to swiftly respond to the pandemic also help states sustain their work-based learning efforts over time and across administrations.

This reference guide builds on the lessons captured in the first six months of the third phase of NGA Center's [Policy Academy on Scaling Work Based Learning](#)<sup>1</sup> (Phase III) and [State Strategies to Scale Work-Based Learning](#) and outlines what policymakers should consider when creating a statewide work-based learning structure. Examples of how a strong statewide structure helped states adapt during the pandemic are included at the end of the guide.

<sup>1</sup> The NGA Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), with support from Siemens Foundation, is assisting states in scaling high-quality work-based learning programs for youth and young adults in STEM-intensive industries.

## Organizing a Statewide Work-Based Learning Structure

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Governors can catalyze change and build a foundation for work-based learning opportunities by establishing a governance structure to oversee this work and allocating resources to support these efforts, among other strategies. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) defines a state's work-based learning governance structure as the agencies or processes that organize and oversee how a state operates its work-based learning programs. States can organize their work-based learning programs in a variety of ways to best meet the state's context.

**State policy makers can use one or more strategies to establish, organize, and oversee programs, including:**

- Establishing a cross-agency working group
- Proposing or supporting legislation
- Designating a work-based learning office or entity
- Coordinating responsibility across agencies
- Creating intermediaries at the state and/or regional level
- Creating a branded initiative

**In addition to dedicating state funding for programs, states may leverage federal funding streams to support work-based learning, including funding from the following sources:<sup>2,3</sup>**

- Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
- Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act Health Profession Opportunity Grants program
- Higher Education Act (HEA)
- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)
- Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES)

## Key Components of a Strong Work-Based Learning Structure

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Through six years of working with states on scaling high-quality work-based learning opportunities, the NGA Center has identified four key components that should be built into a strong work-based learning structure. The four key components are outlined in the following pages.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on federal funding sources see Table 1.  
[https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA\\_Work-Based-Learning\\_Guide\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA_Work-Based-Learning_Guide_final_web.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Federal Resources Playbook for more funding sources for registered apprenticeship.  
<https://www.apprenticeship.gov/sites/default/files/playbook.pdf>

## SHARED DEFINITION

**WHAT:** States should create a common work-based learning definition to articulate parameters for high-quality programs and promote consistency across education and workforce training systems.

**WHY:** Definitions help policymakers start from a place of shared understanding, communicate a common message to students, parents, educators, and employers, and collect relevant data. Definitions build on and can be an important step in implementing a Governor's vision for scaling work-based learning. The process of creating definitions also provides an opportunity to gather input from stakeholders, which creates buy-in and a sense of shared ownership.

**HOW:** States have communicated their definitions in a variety of ways, including through graphics that demonstrate the range of work-based learning activities, embedding definitions in handbooks and training materials for state employees, and codifying definitions into law.<sup>4</sup>

Several states in Phases I & II of the NGA Policy Academy on Scaling Work-Based Learning adopted and built upon the following definition of high-quality work-based learning developed by the NGA Center in consultation with states: work-based learning provides students with authentic work experiences where they can apply and develop employability and technical skills that support success in careers and postsecondary education. Work-based learning activities culminate in an assessment and recognition of acquired knowledge and skills.

## DATA COLLECTION ASSESSMENT

**WHAT:** States should collect data to analyze program availability, employers' needs, labor-market alignment, student participation, and outcomes.

**WHY:** Accurate and timely data, especially as labor-market demands shift, allows states to evaluate their programs and to identify areas for improvement. Disaggregating data by race, gender, and occupation is critical for identifying and addressing equity gaps. Data helps communicate the benefits of work-based learning – for the student and the employer – to policymakers and the public.

**HOW:** States can focus on the importance of collecting and reviewing data from the start by including agency staff who coordinate relevant state data systems at the start of work-based learning planning and implementation conversations. Governors can support efforts to collect data by developing metrics to measure the quality of these programs and building capacity to measure work-based learning across education, workforce, and other relevant systems.

#### Examples of data states can collect include the following:<sup>5</sup>

- Types of programs
- Percentage of programs with a work-experience or on-the-job training component
- Percentage of programs with a classroom instruction component
- Percentage of programs with a STEM focus
- Slots available per program
- Total number of participants

<sup>4</sup> See appendix A of State Strategies to Scale Work-Based Learning an example of a continuum. [https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA\\_Work-Based-Learning\\_Guide\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA_Work-Based-Learning_Guide_final_web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Learn more about data collection in State Strategies to Scale Work-Based Learning [https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA\\_Work-Based-Learning\\_Guide\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA_Work-Based-Learning_Guide_final_web.pdf)

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

**WHAT:** States should meaningfully engage a variety of stakeholders to action plan, create buy-in, and receive feedback to implement and improve work-based learning programs. Ideally, this stakeholder engagement should be institutionalized within the work-based learning structure.

**WHY:** Consistently communicating with stakeholders and creating a feedback loop allows stakeholders to inform ongoing policy recommendations and know their feedback is heard and acted upon. Including a variety of stakeholders allows for more perspectives to guide the creation and improvement of programs that result in better outcomes for all.

**HOW:** Governors can convene stakeholders across public and private sectors to create a work-based learning action plan, and to meet on a regular basis to inform work-based learning policy, implementation, and oversight.

**Stakeholders should include:**

- State-level actors who can drive policy and decision-making on workforce, labor, K-12 education, and postsecondary education at a minimum.
- Other stakeholder groups to consider involving in a regular capacity include employers, educators, parents, students, industry associations, community-based organizations, the public, and other state agencies such as those overseeing economic development, corrections, etc.
- Some states choose to convene stakeholders at the regional level as well through work-based learning intermediaries.

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

**WHAT:** States should create a communications plan to articulate their work-based learning structure, the value of work-based learning, and how individuals can participate in programs.

**WHY:** A multi-pronged communications plan is essential to reaching target audiences to increase participation from students, educators, employers, parents, and other audiences.

**HOW:** Governors have a unique platform from which to set the vision of a state's work-based learning effort and communicate that vision with a broad audience. States have used a variety of communications tools and mediums to raise awareness of work-based learning.

**Successful state communications strategies have included:**

- Holding Governors summits to elevate and engage others in their work-based learning vision.
- Creating a branded initiative to elevate work-based learning programs and create trust and recognition among parents, students, and employers.<sup>6</sup>
- Building a centralized location, such as an online portal, bringing together audiences and creating a consistent hub for engagement.<sup>7</sup>
- Increasingly using social media, like Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, to reach a variety of audiences, but especially students.
- Organizing communications through community organizations, religious centers, radio stations, and other creative means to reach target populations.

<sup>6</sup> See examples of branded initiatives in appendix B of State Strategies to Scale Work-Based Learning. [https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA\\_Work-Based-Learning\\_Guide\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NGA_Work-Based-Learning_Guide_final_web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See an example of an online portal in NGA's case study on NC's Navigator platform. <https://www.nga.org/center/publications/nc-navigator-case-study/>

## State Examples

These examples highlight how strong existing work-based learning structures helped states adapt to serve their populace during the rapidly changing environment of the pandemic.

### ALABAMA



Alabama is using a \$17.8 million Reimagining Workforce Preparation (RWP) grant, repurposing more than \$4 million of its Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) appropriation, and dedicating a \$1 million state appropriation to administer a new program called the Alabama Workforce Stabilization Program (AWSP). The AWSP will provide wage subsidies, deliver skills-based training, and provide supportive services to workers who have been dislocated by COVID-19. The program is designed to upskill workers who need additional skills to succeed and dislocated workers who are determined to be “career ready” for an in-demand occupation. The AWSP is expected to reach more than 2,600 individuals per year over three years, and these individuals will complete on-site, on-the-job learning at participating employers and related technical instruction through the Alabama Technology Network and the Alabama Community College System. Participants receive an industry-recognized credential.

### NEVADA



Nevada’s Governor’s Office of Workforce Innovation (OWINN) is the office designated to drive and align workforce development efforts across the state. OWINN has collaborated with the Governor’s Office of Economic Development to create a EMSI SkillsMatch website to connect individuals to jobs in their area that meet their qualifications. The tool, created in response to COVID-19 layoffs, is used to meet the needs of dislocated workers and translate a person’s existing skills into skills needed for jobs that are currently open.

At the start of the pandemic, OWINN quickly responded by starting a social media campaign on platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn, and also by creating a podcast called “The Innovative Workforce” to inform the public of resources, insights, and opportunities around the state’s response and workforce needs. OWINN also worked with Nevada’s WBL partners to re-brand LifeWorksNV.org, a work-based learning hub providing resources for career seekers, employers, and educators.



## UTAH



Governor Herbert created Talent Ready Utah within the Office of Economic Development during Phase II of NGA's Policy Academy in 2017. The formal body, codified in 2018 to coordinate the state's work-based learning programs, is comprised of education and workforce policymakers as well as industry leaders. During the summer of 2020, Utah's state legislature allocated \$16.5 million from its CARES Act award for short-term training programs that will be administered through a new program called Learn & Work in Utah. Funding was dispersed to institutions of higher education best suited to scale and create new, short-term opportunities for workers who were furloughed, laid off, or displaced by COVID-19. Talent Ready Utah, in partnership with the Utah System of Higher Education, received additional funding to market these new opportunities, many of which will include a work-based learning component as well as tuition assistance for eligible applicants. Just over 5,600 students enrolled in one of the 150 supported programs that ranged in length from 3 to 40 weeks. In February 2021, Utah's legislature allocated an additional \$15 million to a second round of Learn and Work programs based on the success of the initiative.

## WASHINGTON



Career Connect Washington (CCW), created when Governor Inslee signed the Workforce Education Investment Act in 2019, is the state's network of work-based learning stakeholders who provide career-connected learning to Washington students. The statewide coalition of leaders from business, secondary and postsecondary education, and labor is advocating for its programs to play an integral role in the state's economic recovery efforts. CCW adapted to the pandemic by offering virtual employer-led online discussions with students, known as "Career Connect at Home."

While this is intended to serve as a reference guide and is based on research and states' experiences shared with NGA as part of the Policy Academy on Scaling Work-Based Learning, it is not exhaustive of all components or examples. If you have questions about this policy academy or other state work-based learning efforts, please reach out to Rachel Hirsch at [rhirsch@nga.org](mailto:rhirsch@nga.org).