Elements of High-Quality CTE Programs

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Work-based Learning for the New Economy: From “K to J” in Tennessee

By Thomas Gibney

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ne of the hallmarks of career and technical education (CTE) has always been its emphasis on connecting curriculum to the workplace. CTE practitioners pride themselves on their ability to make content come alive by demonstrating how the knowledge and skills students learn in the classroom transfer to the activities they will one day conduct on the job. When it comes to high-quality CTE programs, perhaps no better example can be offered than the ultimate classroom-to-workplace application: work-based learning (WBL).

For those unfamiliar with CTE, work-based learning might sound like an exotic elective or a fancy way to fill a transcript—something reserved for students in search of a “non-academic” credit. But for seasoned educators, work-based learning isn’t just for CTE students, nor should it be seen as an afterthought to a student’s graduation requirements. On the contrary, WBL is a methodology that can be embedded throughout any student’s schooling experience. It is a framework for integrating career preparation into curriculum and an approach to learning that bridges the classroom and the workplace.

Moreover, it is an approach that is shown to be effective, especially in countries where linkages between education and so-called “vocational” training are explicit and intentional. While academic research into the topic is as yet underdeveloped in the United States, the outcomes of these systems speak for themselves. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), countries with strong student vocational training programs allow for easier transitions to the labor market—as in Germany, where the average graduate finds employment in a much quicker time frame, and at a higher entry salary, than his or her American peer.

And yet, in practice, work-based learning in this country has not been implemented to match what we know works in career preparation. In the January 2015 issue of Techni ques, author Corinne Alfeld discussed findings from her study of WBL models in U.S. high schools. She and her colleagues gathered data on three common WBL arrangements: internships/co-operative education, youth apprenticeships and school-based enterprises, focusing her article on out-of-school placements in particular. The takeaways were clear: Too often, out-of-school WBL arrangements do not do enough to connect back to curriculum; coordinators are frequently left in the dark about placement activities; and students are rarely involved in designing their training plans and setting their own learning expectations.

Distill these observations down and it becomes clear that the source of the problem may lie in the lack of common, clear guidelines around what makes for a quality WBL experience—for the student, the school system and the industry partner. But what if states took the lead in crafting these expectations?

This is precisely what Tennessee has done with its new statewide WBL program. As the “statewide” portion suggests, the program represents a departure from the hands-off approach of years past, in which local school systems were often left to figure out on their own what a quality WBL experience should look like. In the new economy, where today’s youth can expect to change employers many times throughout their careers, that hands-off approach no longer makes sense; increasingly, school officials and researchers alike view career preparation across a “kindergarten to job” (K to J) continuum that is premised on early intervention and ongoing exposure. With a strong lead team of five districts piloting the new program this school year, Tennessee has bold plans to revitalize work-based learning to bolster the pipeline from school to career.

Getting Business and Community Engagement Right

Work-based learning, says Chelsea Parker, executive director for the Tennessee Council for Career & Technical Education (TCCCTE), is used to be defined by where the learning took place—in a clini-
The following skills were identified as the most critical employability skills that can be learned through work-based learning. Over 225 participants from all three grand divisions vetted this list during focus groups that included Tennessee administrators, teachers, WBL coordinators, CTE directors and postsecondary institutes.

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Employability Skills Checklist

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Application of Academic and Technical Knowledge and Skills

- Literacy
- Math
- Industry-specific Technical Skills
- Infection-specific Safety Skills

Career Knowledge and Navigation Skills

- Understanding Career Paths
- Planning
- Reflection

21st Century Learning and Innovation Skills

- Creativity and Innovation
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Information Literacy
- Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) Literacy

Personal and Social Skills

- Initiative
- Professionalism, Ethics and Interpersonal Skills
- Cultural and Global Competence
- Adaptability and Flexibility
- Productivity

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Feedback from the Tennessee focus groups indicated that, while the specific needs of employers vary, they have a shared desire for employees who can demonstrate a range of interconnected traits: the ability to apply academic and technical knowledge and skills, yes, but also initiative, professionalism, productivity and effective communication.

“This reality is much deeper than just having a good attitude, especially in a complex, changing economy,” Darche concludes. “The advantage of work-based learning is that it provides students with an incredible opportunity to develop non-cognitive skills, as well as technical skills and applied academics, and see those skills validated in an authentic environment.”

From the student perspective, WBL can be viewed as an outlet for sharpening those skills not readily assessable in the traditional classroom, and from the employer perspective, seeing those skills expressed within a performance-based environment can offer a more accurate barometer of job readiness than a transcript or test score.

This Is What Learning Looks Like

Defining the end result is one thing, but how are students supposed to get there? Parker recognized that Tennessee’s existing policies did not provide districts with a clear idea of what high-quality CTE looks like. In particular, policies did not go far enough to promote the idea of WBL as a continuum of progressive and project-based learning.

Additionally, the need for districts to differentiate between the requirements of policy and recommended successful practices. Parker addressed this by developing several key resources:

- A WBL framework, adopted by the Tennessee Board of Education, which articulates the expectations for WBL programs
- A revised WBL Policy Guide more closely aligned with state regulations and child labor laws
- The WBL Implementation Guide, a brand new professional development resource

This new guide is the first step in what Parker calls a “culture shift” in how individual schools think about WBL programs, moving from an “out-there, use-your-own” mentality to a “peer-to-peer” support system for WBL coordinators focused on collaboration and best practices sharing. Released this spring, the guide describes:

- Recommended strategies for coordinating the work of teachers and counselors
- Examples of how to assess what students have learned and ensure skill transfer from the classroom to the workplace
- Approaches to collaborating with employers, touching on recruitment and program evaluation

Further, the document is packed with ready-made, customizable forms that can be adapted to their specific needs. This practice encourages districts and other partners to use the framework as a guide to differentiating WBL programs and ensuring that the learning can be tailored to the needs of the individual student.

The new WBL Handbook, entitled “What Learning Looks Like,” provides a comprehensive overview of WBL and its role in postsecondary education. The handbook includes a detailed guide to successful WBL practices, including:

- WBL policies and procedures
- WBL program planning and implementation
- WBL program evaluation
- WBL program assessment and accountability

The handbook is designed to be used in conjunction with the WBL Implementation Guide and other resources, providing a comprehensive framework for districts seeking to develop high-quality WBL programs.
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The new WBL program in Tennessee begins with a simple but powerful premise: career awareness starts young and should build progressively through all levels of schooling. If you think about it, this insight reveals what is arguably missing from career preparation models in the United States—we push students through a schooling pipeline that does a poor job of connecting their learning to career activities, ask them to declare a major at postsecondary without really knowing how that major translates into an occupation, and then hand them a diploma one day and expect them to swim or sink in the job market the day after.

Montgomery County, where the WBL pilot is being used to jumpstart a brand-new WBL program in Health Science, placing nursing students in a long-term care facility close to the school. As a rural district, industry relationships were a question mark for CTE Director Danny Mooney early on. While there are not many large employers in Moore County, small and large businesses alike need qualified workers.

As Mooney explained in a recent WBL strategy meeting, getting businesses on board by building open lines of communication is critical to establishing a strong program. This is a sentiment echoed by all the pilot district leaders. The businesses—not just the students—must have a stake in the learning process, too, if the desired outcomes of WBL are truly to be realized.

From K to J: Starting Young, and Dreaming Big

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This is a must-read, though, for any district in pursuit of developing a strong program. As this article has shown, though, defining success is only the starting point. As final revisions to the WBL program are made based on the feedback from the pilot team, TCCTE’s Cheleira Parker and her partners in Tennessee are rolling out spring and summer training sessions to help guide districts in their transition to the new statewide program.

Regional professional learning communities (PLCs) are being established in each of the eight Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) across the state to share successful practices and dive into professional development discussions using the WBL Implementation Guide. These PLCs will be led by the department of education’s CORE consultants, who act as the conduits for state professional development offerings disseminated at the regional level.

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In addition, a new WBL Leadership Council with representation from all CARE regions will be convened for WBL coordinators, who will facilitate the sharing of best practices throughout their designated areas, reinforcing the peer-to-peer culture shift that characterizes TDOE’s professional development model.

Last but not least, the department is establishing a WBL Task Force in conjunction with the Tennessee Departments of Labor and Workforce Development, Economic and Community Development, the Tennessee Board of Regents, TCCTE and other key industry stakeholders to identify and address barriers to student participation in WBL in high-wage, high-demand advanced manufacturing industry sectors in Tennessee.

What’s most compelling about work-based learning’s comeback in Tennessee is that it firmly places students at the center and positions itself as one in a list of many elements of a high-quality CTE program. Under the new policy, coordinators can oversee more types of placements and serve more students with provisions for increased flexibility. A confident graduate can dare to dream big, knowing that options exist and his or her skill sets are valued.

By promoting WBL as a braided and cumulative component of a student’s program of study, connections can be made all across the curriculum, not just in the senior year. This way, students at least get a feel for the water before jumping off the high dive. After all, transitioning to the real world is hard enough. Let’s give students the tools to make a good splash.

Thomas Gibney is the program manager for student success at the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), Division of College & Career Readiness. Does one of your students have an interesting or impressive WBL placement? Contact Thomas at 615-253-3223 or by email at Thomas.Gibney@tn.gov to share your promising practices for postsecondary and career readiness.

EXPLORE MORE

The WBL Toolbox is a set of supplemental resources to the WBL Implementation Guide, designed to help districts build strong and effective WBL programs. Access the full toolbox at http://tn.gov/education/cte/wbl_toolbox.shtml.

Other links you might want to explore:
- WBL Framework:
- WBL Policy Guide:
- Implementation Guide:
- Work-based Learning Career Practicum:
- Career Exploration:

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