

# WHAT IS WORK-BASED LEARNING?

## Work-based learning (WBL)

enables students to learn about careers, build connections with industry professionals, and develop and practice technical, academic and employability skills needed for career success. In fact, [research](#) finds that WBL helps students apply and extend classroom learning, gain motivation, and establish critical understanding of the work environment.

WBL occurs on a continuum, ranging from short-term experiences like workplace tours and guest speakers to more sustained activities like internships and apprenticeships. It may take place in workplaces, in the community, at educational institutions and virtually and should build on and reinforce skills developed in the classroom.

### LEGISLATIVE DEFINITION OF WORK-BASED LEARNING

Work-based learning is defined in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, as amended in 2018 by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, 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 engagement with the tasks required in a given career field, that are aligned to curriculum and instruction.*

This definition impacts key provisions in the law, including the optional accountability indicator measuring high school students' participation in WBL. Some states only count experiences from the later stages of the WBL continuum for this indicator, while others allow a wider variety of WBL experiences.

## Work-based Learning Continuum

The WBL continuum provides students with multiple opportunities to experience careers and engage with employers in age-appropriate ways that increase in intensity over time. States, school districts, institutions and organizations have developed different models of the WBL continuum. One commonly used WBL continuum is this model developed by [ConnectED](#).

### AWARENESS

#### Learning ABOUT work.

Build awareness of the variety of careers available and the role of postsecondary education; broaden student options.

### EXPLORATION

#### Learning ABOUT work.

Explore career options for the purpose of motivating students and to inform their decision making in high school and postsecondary education.

### PREPARATION

#### Learning THROUGH work.

Apply learning through practical experience that develops knowledge and skills necessary for success in careers.

### PARTICIPATION

#### Learning FOR work.

Train for employment and postsecondary education in a specific range of occupations.

## Types of Work-based Learning Experiences on the Continuum

The following definitions generally describe common WBL experiences. Specific states, school districts, institutions or organizations may have additional categories of work-based learning, define these terms differently or place them in different stages along the WBL continuum.

### AWARENESS

**Guest speakers:** Employers talk to students and answer questions about their industry, jobs within that industry and the relevant education and training needed.

**Workplace tours:** Students visit a worksite to learn about the business, observe workers performing tasks and ask questions of employers.

**Career fairs:** Multiple employers gather to discuss their respective occupations and workplaces with students.

### EXPLORATION

**Job shadowing:** Students are paired with an industry professional to observe the day-to-day responsibilities of a particular occupation.

**Mentorships:** Students are matched with an industry professional who provides advice and support related to the workplace, careers and education.

### PREPARATION

**School-based enterprises:** Students operate a business in a school setting that provides goods or services for other students, school staff or the community, such as a bakery or veterinary grooming service.

**Simulated Workplaces:** Classrooms are organized as a real or mock business operated by learners. Industry professionals serve as mentors and inspectors for each Simulated Workplace.

**Workplace challenges/industry-sponsored projects:** Students develop a product or service for an employer partner.

### PARTICIPATION

**Internships:** Students perform substantive work over an extended period for an employer in a real or virtual workplace that aligns with their career plans. Internships may be paid or unpaid and may or may not lead to academic credit.

**Cooperative work experiences:** Students take part in structured work experiences at a worksite that aligns with their career plans while earning academic credit. These experiences may be paid or unpaid.

**Apprenticeships:** Individuals engage in paid on-the-job learning experiences paired with supplemental classroom instruction. Some apprenticeships are Registered Apprenticeships that are approved and validated by the U.S. Department of Labor or a state apprenticeship agency and result in a nationally recognized certificate of completion. The apprenticeship category also includes the following:

- **Youth apprenticeships:** Learners aged 16-24 take part in high school or postsecondary academic and technical instruction integrated with paid on-the-job learning, providing a foundation for students to enter a Registered Apprenticeship Program or pursue postsecondary education.
- **Pre-apprenticeships:** Individuals prepare to meet requirements for and succeed in a Registered Apprenticeship Program by learning basic industry skills, interacting with tools used on the job and developing employability skills. Pre-apprenticeships may be paid or unpaid.

**CAREER-SPECIFIC WORK-BASED LEARNING:** Certain career areas have WBL programs or experiences specific to that industry.

Examples include:

- **Clinical experiences:** Health care students provide supervised patient care in a health care setting, such as a hospital.
- **Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE):** Agricultural education students participate in this industry-specific career development model, which moves from foundational SAE such as career exploration and workplace safety training to immersion SAE such as internships and entrepreneurship.

Additional resources about the work-based learning continuum can be found in ACTE's High-quality CTE Library Work-based Learning section at [acteonline.org/library](http://acteonline.org/library)