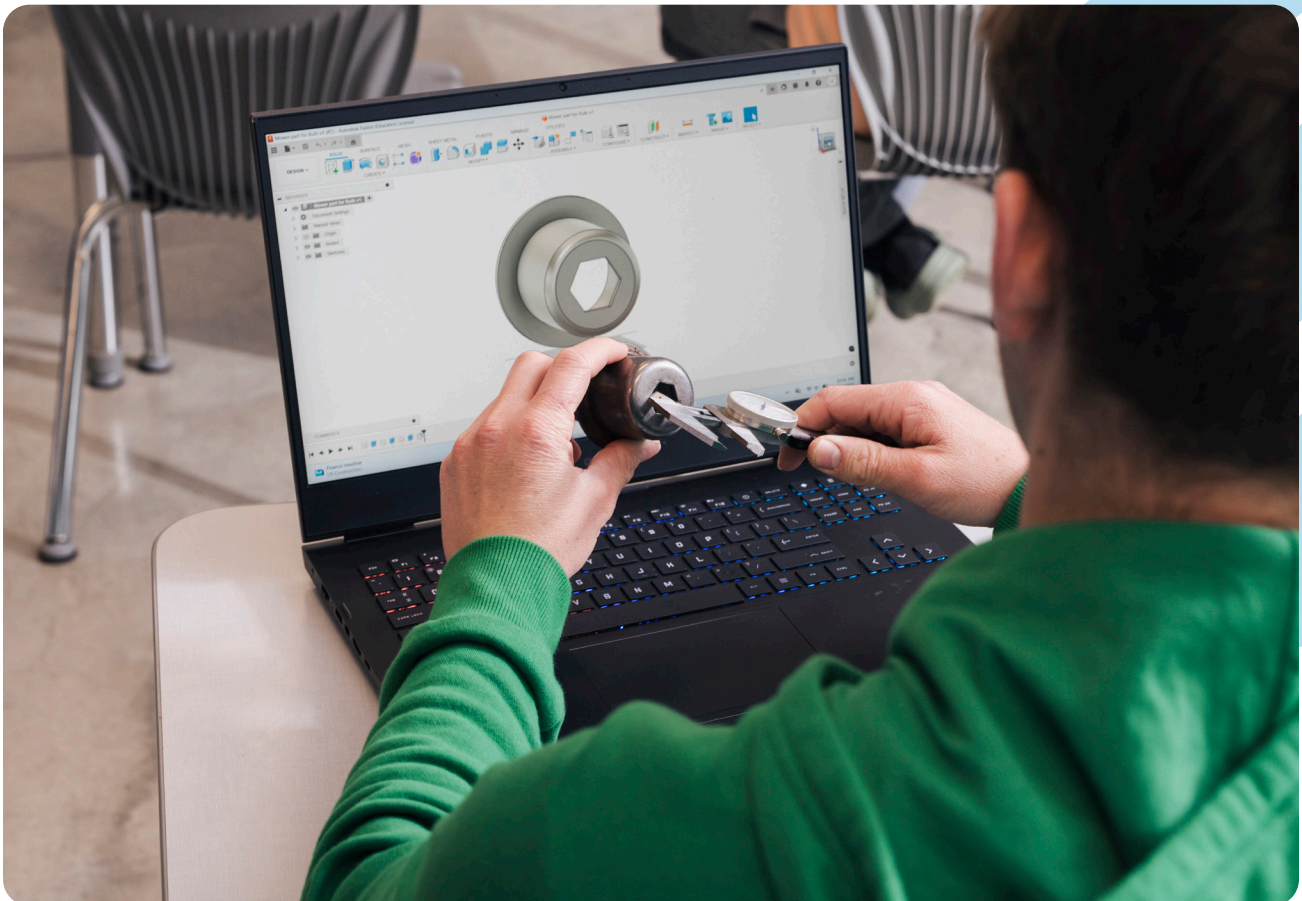


The Role of K-12 Work-Based Learning Intermediaries



Purpose

Over the past decade, the nature of work in the United States has changed significantly. Automation, digitization, and shifting industry needs are changing how employers define, hire for, and develop talent. Many jobs that once provided stable wages without a college degree now require stronger technical skills, additional training, and the ability to adapt as work changes.

At the same time, the systems meant to prepare students for this changing economy have not kept pace. While most students graduate high school, far fewer enroll in postsecondary education or training, persist and complete a credential on time, study fields aligned to high-demand careers, or participate in meaningful work-based learning experiences.¹

As a result, too few students are connected to good and promising jobs and careers.

These disconnects have become more visible and more urgent in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, widening learning gaps, disrupting career exposure, and making the transition from high school to career even more difficult for many students.²



As the disconnect between education and workforce has grown, states have increasingly recognized that preparing students for life after high school requires a different approach. Work-based learning has emerged as a promising strategy because it brings employers into the education process and gives students opportunities to build skills through real-world experience.

Over the past decade, Indiana has intentionally strengthened career-connected learning through policy and system changes that embed work-based learning into the high school experience. Graduation Pathways, first available to the Class of 2023, gave students new ways to demonstrate postsecondary readiness through career-connected experiences—an early step toward formalizing this approach.³

Building on that foundation, Indiana approved a redesigned high school diploma in 2024, with new guidance released in January 2025 for students beginning with the Class of 2029.⁴ The new diploma increases flexibility, allowing students to align coursework and experiences with post-graduation goals and earn Honors or Honors Plus Seals that signal readiness for college, career, or military service.

1. Indiana's college-going rate drops again, dipping to 51.7%: <https://indianacapitalchronicle.com/2025/07/24/indianas-college-going-rate-drops-again-dipping-to-51-7/>

2. Ascend Indiana, Indiana's Evolving Labor Market (2022): <https://ascendindiana.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Indianas-Evolving-Labor-Market-Executive-Summary.pdf>

3. Indiana Department of Education, Graduation Pathways: https://www.in.gov/doe/students/graduation-pathways/#Graduation_Pathways

4. The New Indiana Diploma (2025): https://www.in.gov/doe/files/Final-Diploma-Rule-2025_1.pdf

For students pursuing certain seals, work-based learning is now a required component, ranging from 75 to 650 hours. New guidelines also define which types of work-based learning experiences qualify for those hours.⁵

These changes created new expectations for schools and employers. Schools are being asked to expand access to meaningful work-based learning experiences for students, while employers are being asked to play a larger role in shaping and supporting those opportunities.



Types of work-based learning experiences

Academic internship

workplace-based internship integrating academic learning and practical application

DOL-registered apprenticeship program

specific program under Department of Labor guidelines

Employability skills co-op

co-op combining on-the-job training with classroom instruction

Industry-developed team challenge

a project-based learning experience in which a company challenges students to solve real workplace problems

Micro-internship

short-term engagement blending job shadowing and full-fledged internship

Modern youth apprenticeship

a paid, postsecondary-credit eligible program integrating school-based and work-based learning

Pre-apprenticeship

developed under registered apprenticeship program guidelines

School-based enterprise

student-run business in a school setting

Student entrepreneurial experience

student-developed and -led business with student as primary administrator

Technical internship

aligning with a student's career and technical education pathway

Workplace simulation

simulated workplace in a school, career center, or training facility

5. Work-Based Learning Reporting Guidance (2025): https://www.in.gov/che/cte/files/WBL-Reporting-Guidance_August-2025.pdf

As these expectations grew, so did the need for stronger coordination across the education and workforce system. Schools could not scale high-quality work-based learning on their own, and employers needed clearer, more consistent ways to engage. This created a growing need for intermediary organizations to coordinate partnerships, support program design, and translate work-based learning expectations into real opportunities for students.

The role intermediaries play in their local communities is neither new nor understated. A December 2020 report published by Lumina Foundation described intermediaries as essential “bridge builders” that align educators, employers, policymakers, learners, and workers around shared skill needs, clearer pathways, and stronger connections between education and the labor market. National evidence on intermediaries is still largely case-based, but examples from across the country suggest that strong intermediaries can help regions expand training programs, increase employer participation, and build more coherent education-to-career pathways.⁷

Ascend began working with—and empowering—intermediaries to deliver meaningful work-based learning opportunities as early as 2019 with its support of the Central Indiana Modern Youth Apprenticeship pilot with EmployIndy. The success of this pilot rested on strong regional coordination, which included engaging employers, aligning partners, and supporting implementation.⁸

Following the Central Indiana pilot, Ascend continued its work with intermediaries through a partnership with Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. Ascend supported the statewide expansion of youth apprenticeship and helped to grow the footprint of regional intermediaries, while deepening its understanding of the operational support needed to scale high-quality, employer-led work-based learning across Indiana.⁹

WHAT IS AN INTERMEDIARY?

An intermediary, as defined in Indiana statute, is an organization that connects individuals with companies seeking new workers.⁶

While intermediaries can serve many different purposes across Indiana, some focus specifically on helping students and job seekers gain real-world experience. These are known as work-based learning intermediaries, and their work centers on bringing education and industry together in practical, hands-on ways.

They support the design and implementation of work-based learning by coordinating across schools, employers, and community partners. They add capacity where local systems are stretched and bring workforce and talent expertise to regional partnerships.

WHAT IS YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP?

Youth apprenticeship is a structured, work-based learning program that begins in the junior year of high school. It combines paid employment, on-the-job learning, and related classroom-based instruction. These programs can lead to postsecondary credentials, college credit, and direct connections to career pathways.

6. Indiana General Assembly (2025): <https://iga.in.gov/laws/2025/ic/titles/21>

7. Bridge Builders: How Intermediaries Can Connect Education and Work in a Postpandemic World (2020): <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/bridge-builders/>

8. Ascend Indiana and EmployIndy launch modern apprenticeship program (2020): <https://www.cicpindiana.com/ascend-indiana-and-employindy-launch-modern-apprenticeship-program-for-high-school-students-in-high-demand-fields/>

9. ROI awarded youth apprenticeship funding from Ascend Indiana (2021): <https://regionalopportunityinc.org/2021/10/04/roi-awarded-youth-apprenticeship-funding/>

The need was clear. Scaling youth apprenticeship statewide required more than a strong model. It required the regional infrastructure and intermediary capacity to help schools, employers, and community partners put that model into practice.

Ascend's work through these two apprenticeship projects culminated in an Indiana Youth Apprenticeship Community of Practice.¹⁰ The Community of Practice, supported by the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, brought together regional intermediaries leading youth apprenticeship sites, K-12 partners, state leaders, and policymakers to share insights, identify common challenges, and better understand what is needed to scale high-quality work-based learning across Indiana.

From 2020 to 2024, Ascend provided guided implementation support to eight regional intermediary-led youth apprenticeship sites across Indiana. Together, these sites served more than 580 students and engaged employers across multiple regions and industries.

As regional youth apprenticeship efforts demonstrated the requirements for high-quality implementation, Indiana's broader work-based learning expectations continued to expand. The new diploma requirements made work-based learning a central part of student preparation, but the capacity to meet those expectations failed to keep pace.

¹⁰ Indiana leans into youth apprenticeships: <https://www.ccdaily.com/2024/03/indiana-leans-into-youth-apprenticeships/>



By the numbers

from 2020 to 2024

8

regional intermediary-led youth apprenticeship sites across Indiana guided by Ascend

580+

students and employers across multiple regions and industries served by these regional intermediary-led youth apprenticeship sites

What emerged was a need for coordination, staffing, employer engagement, and implementation support required to make work-based learning feasible at scale. The resulting pressure revealed how unevenly prepared different regions were to meet the state's expanded expectations and reinforced the importance of intermediary support for both schools and employers.

To better understand these dynamics, Ascend conducted more than 60 conversations with high schools and engaged employers through its Workforce Council throughout 2025. These conversations revealed challenges that were not isolated to a single region but reflected broader patterns across the state.

Challenges to Expanding Work-Based Learning Opportunities	
Schools	Employers
Schools are being asked to expand access to high-quality work-based learning while also navigating new graduation requirements, limited staff capacity, and varying levels of employer engagement. Common challenges include: • Lack of staffing and capacity to design new programs or expand current offerings • Are often not equipped to engage employers effectively or translate employer needs into student experiences • Need clearer tools and guidance to understand which experiences qualify and how to effectively implement them	Employers are also being asked to play a larger role in student preparation, but many lack the time, clarity, or support needed to engage consistently. Common challenges include: • Lack of staffing and capacity to design new programs or expand current offerings • Receive requests from multiple schools in the same community, often with different expectations and levels of support • Do not always understand why or how to support work-based learning • Need clearer guidance on how current programming can align with Indiana's work-based learning requirements

While these challenges affect schools and employers directly, they also shape the work of intermediaries. Intermediaries often step in to help address these gaps by coordinating partners, clarifying expectations, supporting employer engagement, and helping translate policy requirements into practical implementation. However, Ascend's research showed that intermediaries face many of the same challenges, including:

Inconsistent guidance

Lack of statewide direction leads to unclear roles, uneven employer engagement, and inconsistent capacity.

Fragmented ecosystem

Multiple organizations perform intermediary functions without shared definitions, creating confusion and inefficiencies.

Regional variation

Differences in staffing and capacity across regions result in uneven implementation and quality.



Uneven access

Limited intermediary presence in some areas creates gaps in support and inconsistent student access.

System misalignment

Unclear expectations and limited employer incentives slow implementation and reduce scale.

Limited coordination

Overlapping efforts lead to duplication, competition for employers and funding, and missed opportunities for shared solutions.

Unstable funding

Reliance on short-term funding constrains staffing, limits capacity, and threatens long-term sustainability.



It is critical to understand how intermediaries operate, the functions they perform, and the conditions that shape their work to strengthen Indiana's broader work-based learning system. Without a shared understanding of how intermediaries operate across the state, efforts to expand work-based learning risk remaining fragmented and inconsistent.

Ascend's 2026 work-based learning strategy strengthens and aligns Indiana's intermediary infrastructure through greater clarity, coordination, and practical support. Through the Intermediary Learning Network, Ascend is convening 23 regional intermediaries to build a shared understanding, surface common challenges, and inform the development of statewide tools and guidance.¹¹ This work will also help define the core functions of work-based learning intermediaries and the conditions required for their effectiveness.

To build on this understanding, Ascend has partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to more clearly define and quantify the role of intermediaries in Indiana's work-based learning ecosystem. Using the [Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries](#) developed by Strada Education Foundation, AIR's research will examine key intermediary functions, including employer engagement, program design, and implementation support. The partnership also includes a cost study to better understand the resources required to carry out those functions effectively and at scale. The resulting report will inform policymakers and state agencies of the central role intermediaries play in enabling legislated work-based learning, as well as the constraints posed by unstable or insufficient funding.

As Indiana expands work-based learning, the next phase must build strong coordinating infrastructure, clarify roles, and align efforts to scale high-quality opportunities.

¹¹ Ascend Indiana's Intermediary Learning Network (2026): <https://ascendindiana.com/ascend-indiana-launches-regional-work-based-learning-support-network-and-resource-hub/>