

Building Bridges Between Education and Industry: Youth Work-Based Learning as Talent Development Strategy

About American Student Assistance® (ASA)

American Student Assistance (ASA) is a national nonprofit changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through equitable access to career readiness information and experiences. ASA helps middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. ASA fulfills its mission—in schools and beyond the classroom—by providing free digital experiences, including Futurescape®, Next Voice™, and EvolveMe®, directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. ASA fosters a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. To learn more about ASA, www.asa.org/about-asa.

Executive Summary

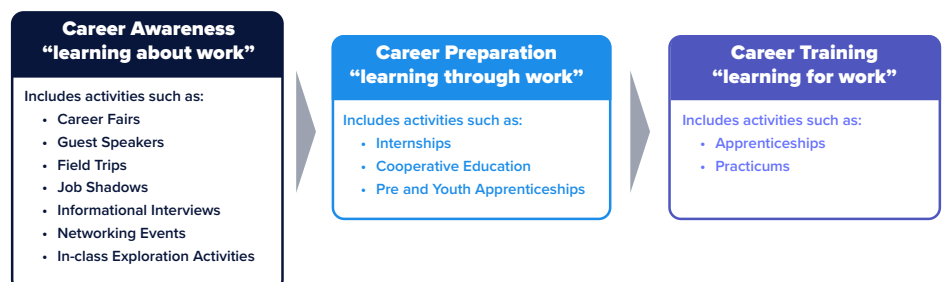
Businesses today are struggling to fill open positions with skilled workers, often faulting our nation’s K-12 and higher education systems for not aligning learning curriculums with the skills needed for the modern workforce. Educators and school administrators point out that industry needs to do its part to bridge the gap between education and industry, by reaching back earlier into the workforce pipeline to help expose young people to the world of work, and ensure they are learning the skills needed before candidates interview for open jobs.

The reality is education and employers must better work together to give middle- and high school-age youth the hands-on, workplace experiences they need to acquire durable professional skills for work and life, develop confidence, and build social capital. But in order to ensure all students, including those from under-resourced schools and communities, and regardless of their socioeconomic background, gender, race, religion, disability status, sexual orientation or gender identity, have access to high-quality work-based learning, many more businesses will have to take steps to make career-connected learning opportunities available. And for that to happen, the return on investment for employers - the tangible benefits beyond the feel-good reason of giving back to the community -- as well as proven solutions to overcome real barriers, must be better defined, documented and shared among business leaders, HR professionals and employees of all ranks.

Towards that end, American Student Assistance® (ASA) recently surveyed businesses on how (or if) they are putting in place work-based learning programs for youth younger than 18. We also explored the benefits they’re realizing as a result, and the challenges they face along the way. While work-based learning can ideally encompass a continuum of work-related exposure activities spanning elementary and secondary grades, our surveys typically asked about “high school internships” as that is the term most businesses use and recognize.

We Define WBL as opportunities for students to learn through work

Work-based learning is often described as a continuum of work-related activities spanning elementary and secondary grades



Key Takeaways

The major highlights of our research include:

- **High school internships are slightly on the rise.** Building upon prior ASA research, our most recent survey found a small increase in the number of businesses offering these opportunities, from 30% in 2018 to 38% five years later. However, the number of available opportunities for this work remains low. That same 2018 survey found that only 2% of high students had actually completed a high school internship. While that number has likely risen since 2018, the 8 percentage point increase in employers providing programs likely only produced a small number of opportunities at each work site.
- **Altruism plays a major role in business decisions to host high school interns.** The majority of survey respondents (92%) cited giving back to the community as a somewhat or very important reason for providing an internship. Other important reasons included helping individual students gain skills (89%) and exposing students to careers that might be inaccessible to them (85%).
- **Businesses with high school interns see benefits to their talent development and DEI strategies.** While corporate social responsibility factors heavily into employers' reasoning for instituting a high school internship program, businesses also anticipate real, tangible benefits to either their own organizations or their industry. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents said high school interns strengthened their industry pipeline as a whole; 81% said they filled their employment pipeline with diverse candidates and 78% said they enhanced their organizations' Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives; 77% said they used high school interns to build the pipeline for entry level positions; and 65% said interns reduced the workload of their full-time employees.
- **High school internship programs can pose challenges, but businesses are finding solutions.** Survey respondents cited the top three barriers in managing a high school internship program as: determining work best suited for them (43%); attracting qualified interns (42%); and scheduling around interns' availability (39%). Employers also face challenges around interns' lack of transportation to the workplace, having enough staff resources to manage interns, and securing funding for an internship program. But they are finding solutions, such as taking advantage of state funding to help subsidize intern pay.
- **While one third of businesses say they are very or somewhat likely to start a high school internship program, more than a quarter (27%) say it is very unlikely.** Small businesses are less likely than mid- to large-sized businesses to show interest in beginning a program. An increase in funding for intern pay, the ability to identify a more suitable workload, and an opportunity to give back to the community are the top three things that might motivate an organization to start a high school program.

Bringing youth work-based learning to scale nationwide is an important strategy in developing a U.S. education-to-career continuum that both imbues individuals with the skills they need to attain family-sustaining jobs and lead healthy, productive lives, and provides industry with the skilled workforce needed to maintain global competitiveness amid rapidly changing economies and labor markets. With a better understanding of the benefits realized by providing access to the workplace for those younger than 18, as well as how to overcome common challenges, the business sector will be well-positioned to play an equal role alongside education in preparing today's youth for tomorrow's jobs.

Introduction

In 2022, there were over 11 million jobs in the U.S. unfilled and nearly half of employers were unable to fill their vacancies, exceeding the 48-year average.ⁱ Presently, businesses nationwide are struggling to find skilled labor and report sinking confidence in recent graduates' abilities and skills – a particularly troublesome fact when so many employers are trying to find young talent to replace the “gray tsunami” of retiring Baby Boomers. Whereas in the past employers were content to be passive consumers of the workers produced by our nation's secondary and higher education systems, many businesses today are instead opting to become actively involved in producing young talent, through formal work-based learning such as apprenticeships, internships, and cooperative education.

Once reserved primarily for students 18 and older pursuing postsecondary education, on-the-job career-connected learning experiences are increasingly being made available to students at a younger age: Research conducted by American Student Assistance® (ASA) reflects a rise in recent years in the number of businesses offering high school internships, from 30% in 2018 to 38% in 2023.ⁱⁱ

While work-based learning in secondary education has made strides, wide participation in these opportunities nationwide remains elusive. More businesses may be offering youth work-based learning, but it is still not enough to create systemic change in our nation's college and career readiness pathway development ecosystem. An ASA study found that although 79% of high school students reported being interested in a work-based learning experience, only 34% were aware of any opportunities for students their age — and just 2% of students had completed one form of work-based learning, an internship, during high school.ⁱⁱⁱ

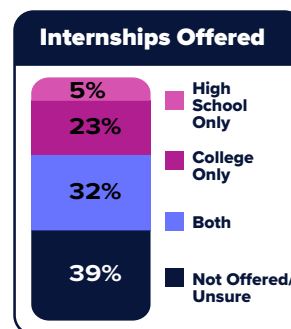
Why has youth-based learning failed to catch on at a larger scale? Many employers are still reticent to engage youth younger than 18, often citing barriers like compliance with labor laws, transportation, lack of work suitable for younger students, lack of funding, lack of supervisory support and more. Too often, though, it is not just the “what” (building an efficient and effective internship program) that stands in employers' way, but also the “why.” For most businesses, the high school internship is seen as an altruistic gesture to the community – to provide opportunities for young people to experience new environments, learn new skills, build a career identity, and better chart a path to and through postsecondary education that aligns to their career goals.

While this view of high school internships, apprenticeships and other career exposure programs as good corporate social

responsibility is legitimate, it overlooks the tangible, bottom line benefits to the employer. In fact, youth work-based learning can be a winning business strategy to develop talent pipelines and attract young workers to a specific field; create workforces more representative of their communities; and play a more formative role in teaching tomorrow's workers the requisite industry-specific and foundational skills needed to thrive in 21st century careers. To truly bring youth work-based learning to scale nationwide, employers must perceive it not as a nice-to-have corporate citizenship initiative, but instead as a must-have talent solution to overcome the “skills gap” hiring difficulties so prevalent in recent years.

To better understand what motivates employers to offer youth internships, apprenticeships and other career exposure programs, ASA, a national nonprofit changing the way students learn about careers and prepare for their futures, conducted a national survey of more than 500 businesses in 2023. The following report details the survey's findings, providing insight into the types of businesses offering these opportunities, their reasoning for doing so, the benefits they believe these programs offer, and the innovative solutions they have implemented to overcome barriers. Throughout the report, interviews reveal employers' on-the-ground perspectives, best practices and lessons learned and we conclude with recommendations for work-based learning, policy and paths to action employers can take as first steps.

Who Offers Internships?



Over the last five years, ASA surveys have found a modest increase in organizations offering high school internships, from 30% in an ASA 2018 survey of 489 Human Resources professionals to 38% in 2023. Of those who do offer internships, most (32%) employ both college and high school

youth, while only 5% offer internships to high school students solely. Overall, college internships remain much more common, with 55% of businesses offering them. Additionally, two-thirds (70%) of survey respondents have never had a high school internship program.

High school internship opportunities vary little by region; results show a fairly even distribution across the nation, with the West leading the way with 41%, followed by the Northeast at 39%, the South at 35% and the Midwest at 34%.

Internships are not the only form of career-connected learning employers engage in. On average, just over half – 52% - of survey respondents reported participating in at least one of a range of work-based learning activities, including career fairs, mentoring, job shadowing/bring-student-to-work days, informational interviews, open house and field trips, classroom presentations and career-related competitions. While these opportunities are primarily offered to high school students, some employers do extend these offerings to students as young as middle school.

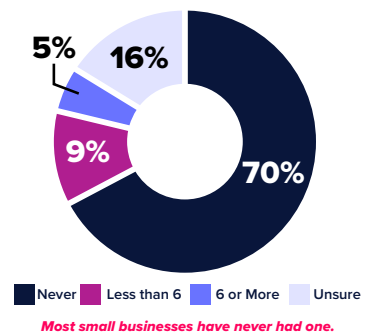
When it comes to what types of businesses offer youth work-based learning, size matters. Survey results show that small organizations (less than 100 employees) are much less likely to offer some form of career-connected opportunity. In fact, large companies (500+ employees) are more than twice as likely to offer high school internships. Microsoft, Bank of America, and KPMG are three examples of well-known large corporations with paid high school internship programs. As one survey respondent, a small suburban professional consulting company in Washington with no internship program currently, stated, “What is the minimum size of a company that can invest in internships? Small companies dealing with a specific profession have little ability to avail themselves of internship opportunities.” There is no

minimum size of a company that can invest in internships, and another respondent from Florida indicated a willingness to explore adding interns as the environment for small business continues to improve post-COVID: “These survey questions fall in a difficult time for small and micro-businesses like mine. My answers reflect the times we are in and will change as soon as the economic situation changes.”

Why Businesses Offer High School Internships

Giving back to the community topped the list of motivators for implementing a high school internship program, with 92% of respondents rating that factor as somewhat or very important. Eighty-nine percent of respondents, meanwhile, said helping individual students develop skills was an important reason. Since younger interns are typically converted to full-time employees at a lower rate than older interns, many businesses may see a high school internship program as

How Many Years Ago Did You Have a High School Internship Program?



Most small businesses have never had one.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

Wegmans Food Markets

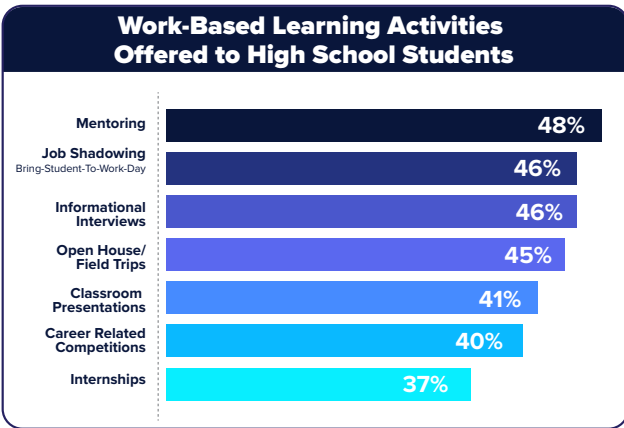
Wegmans is a mid-sized regional grocer, based in Rochester, NY, with about 53,000 employees operating in 8 states and Washington, DC. “We’re in the food business and we love it,” explains Ansley Kelly, Divisional Learning & Development Manager. “We’re over 100 years old now, still family owned and privately held, which gives us a lot of flexibility and the ability to truly be an exceptional employer.”

ASA sat down with Ansley to discuss her experience working her way up the Wegmans ranks, the company’s long tradition of youth employment and its well-structured internship program. Ansley started with Wegmans at age 17, which is common for a large portion of their workforce.

Ansley points out that Wegmans emphasizes development of young talent. “One thing I would say is distinct about Wegmans and makes the internship program work well is the approach to high school students and the development of young people. So much of what drives that internal culture is that we start talking about each person’s responsibility to develop and support others very, very early. So even as a 19-year-old first-year intern, I knew that I was on the hook for developing the people around me and helping to provide the hand up for the next person. It was very clear: You’re a leader and you should be paying attention to the talent around you, and how you can help us bring on the next class of interns or help that person cross-train in another area of the department. That responsibility for development is shared across all levels of leadership.”

Wegmans recently began participating in CareerWise Greater Buffalo, a Say Yes Buffalo initiative that is a modern youth apprenticeship program connecting Buffalo students to career paths. Similar to internships, youth apprenticeships are another form of work-based learning, but they are typically longer than the standard internship and combine intervals of work experience and classroom education. Apprenticeships are paid and often lead to a full-time position; traditionally found only in the trade industries like construction, modern youth apprenticeships are now being used to fill high-wage, high-demand jobs in fields such as information technology, finance, and business operations. Say Yes Buffalo is a nonprofit working to remove barriers to educational attainment, workforce participation and economic mobility for students in public and charter schools in Buffalo, NY. While generally community organizations acting as intermediary between an employer, students and schools can help alleviate administrative burdens, Ansley points out there can be challenges, especially when a company has an already well-established youth employment program. “In today’s compliance environment, it’s difficult to invite a third party into any employment relationship. So, we’re working through that. But there are also incredible advantages to working with an intermediary; often they give you opportunity to be in these thought circles and hear what other employers are doing. Say Yes does such a wonderful job of employer education. We learn from them all the time and they bring a ton to the table.”

Wegmans’ people, their approach to developing a youth talent pipeline, and their intentional efforts to create a hospitable environment for young workers are all successful elements of building bridges from education to industry. “I’ve been working here almost 12 years now, and every day I find something new about this company that I love,” exudes Ansley. “We don’t always get it right, but we’ve always believed good people working together towards a common goal can achieve anything they set out to do. When you hire for good people, you end up with an organization whose intentions are properly aligned, making for a welcoming environment.”



delivering less immediate return on investment, and so view it as “doing good for others” rather than benefitting the organization directly. “In other countries, such as Germany, business recognizes the value of investing in local talent because they have support structures in place, like their apprenticeship system, to help handle it,” explains Victor Hernandez-Gantes, Ph.D., Professor of Career and Workforce Education at the University of South Florida. “So, there is no convincing of why they have to do it and how they have to do it. We don’t have that kind of thing here, so employers may not have the mindset to understand that it pays to invest in the development of local talent. And that is something that is kind of a weak link in our culture.”

To be sure, the individual intern does experience tremendous benefit from an internship while still in high school, both in the short- and long-term.

An ASA 2023 survey of a nationwide representative sample of nearly 500 former high school interns, now aged 35 to 40, revealed that:

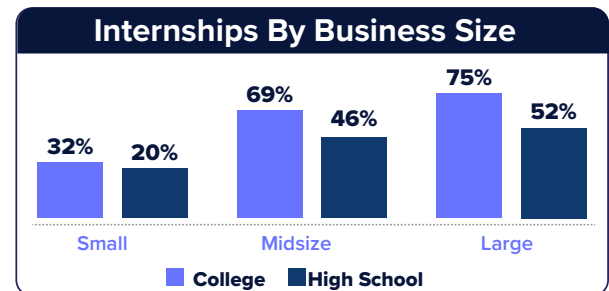
- 76% are currently working in their chosen career (63% full-time; 13% part-time).
- Most surveyed (87%) feel the internship experience helped them understand the type of career they want – over half, 57%, said it helped very much and 30% said it helped somewhat.
- 52% said their internship benefited them through improved skills; 51% said work experience; and 47% said a better understanding of what they wanted or did not want for a career.
- Almost three quarters (71%) believe they currently earn or will earn higher wages than their peers who did not complete a high school internship.
- Of those who were financially compensated for their high school internship, 80% believe they earn more compared to 62% who were not financially compensated.

ROI: Tangible Benefits for Business

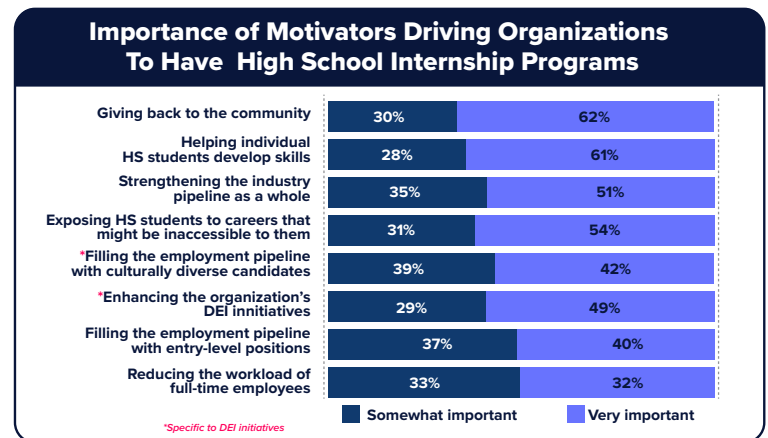
However, while benefits to the individual learner are myriad, businesses also realize several advantages from instituting a high school internship program.

Filling the Employment Pipeline

For example, of those survey respondents with an existing high school internship program, 86% said that strengthening the industry pipeline as a whole was an important motivation, while 77% chose filling the employment pipeline with entry level positions. Interestingly, large companies (500+ employees) were much more likely than small companies to think filling the employment pipeline was an important reason to offer high school internships (88% vs 60%).



Today, many industries facing severe talent shortages are looking to recruit talent at a younger age. “I worked in healthcare before I came into telecommunications,” says Patrick Todd, vice president of human resources and public relations at RTC Communications in Indiana. “With the healthcare world, especially the shortage of nursing staff, we knew we had to go young, and I see that now in telecommunications . . . young kids are coming into us as high school apprentices. We’re able to bring these kids in at 16 or 17 years of age, expose them to the workforce in the areas that they think they want to be in, and give them a year to two to confirm, ‘Yeah, this is something I think I want to pursue in college’. Then they continue to be with us, take college courses and grow into the various positions we need - network engineer, telecommunications engineer, whatever.”



Stakeholders in the industry, education and philanthropic sectors are also uniting to build younger talent pipelines. In 2024 Bloomberg Philanthropies announced a \$250 million initiative to create new high schools that will

prepare 6,000 students to either enter directly into high-demand healthcare jobs with family-sustaining wages or advance their healthcare career through post-secondary education. The initiative matches public education systems with hospitals in 10 communities across the country, with students able to participate in immersive work-based learning at the partner healthcare system. In ninth and tenth grades, students will participate in job-shadowing and practice their skills in simulation labs; starting in eleventh grade, students will have access to paid healthcare internships and professional mentoring.

Diversifying the Talent Pipeline

Businesses can employ youth interns not only to create a pool of skilled workers for the future, but also to diversify their workforces and further Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging initiatives. For example, at the postsecondary level, the nonprofit New York Jobs CEO Council, comprised of some of New York's largest employers, works with the City University of New York to provide apprenticeships, internships, and micro-credentials to 100,000 low-income New Yorkers, especially Black, LatinX and Asian communities.

Another example of a postsecondary internship program with DEIB at its core can be found at California-based NVIDIA, a preeminent AI technology company with 27,000 global employees. In his role as NVIDIA Head of Strategic Initiatives for the Developer Ecosystem, Louis Stewart is charged with providing access and opportunity to underserved communities when it comes to AI technology. That includes recruiting students from those communities to become interns in NVIDIA's uber-competitive internship program. "I work a lot with historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, indigenous

colleges, community colleges nationwide, and then communities of learning globally," explains Stewart. "We try to develop partnerships and relationships with the different entities so that they can get exposed to us, our subject matter experts and our technology, but then also develop lifelong learning relationships with a lot of folks so that they don't necessarily just come into our ecosystem for a short time, but they stay in our ecosystem for a long time. And we hope to impact socio-economic outcomes for the folks that come learn from us. We hope to inspire the next generation and AI startups, and influence what happens next and how the technology evolves."

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In fact, 83% of ASA survey respondents who offer high school internships rated helping full-time employees develop mentorship skills as an important benefit, making it the second most important benefit behind introducing new skillsets.

While employers may readily see connections between DEIB initiatives and established college internship programs, the ASA survey results suggest they are less inclined to perceive the link between high school internship programs and DEIB: Of those with an existing youth internship program, less than half (42%) strongly agreed that filling the employment pipeline with culturally diverse candidates was a motivation to offer a high school internship program, while only 49% strongly agreed that enhancing the organization's DEIB initiatives was a primary reason. In general, larger businesses were more likely than small to choose DEIB as a motivating factor. Of those without a high school internship program, when asked whether they agreed with the statement "My organization does not currently offer internships to high school students because we don't view it as a way to diversify the talent pipeline," 43% were neutral and 24% agreed.

Overall, 47% of surveyed employers strongly agreed DEIB is a high priority of their high school internship programs, with just over half (51%) of businesses located in urban settings strongly agreeing. Additionally, 62% of survey respondents who rated their company's cultural competency as very or somewhat high strongly agreed that their high school internship program prioritized DEIB. Moving forward, highlighting the potential of youth internship to impact DEIB efforts in the business community will be key to its expansion.

Introducing New Skillsets and Technical Knowledge

Today's youth are tech natives and so it comes as no surprise that of those survey respondents who offer internships to high school students, 84% thought introducing new skillsets and technical knowledge was an important reason, making it the top-rated benefit. For companies looking to stay on the forefront of the latest technological advances,

high school interns can inject new skills and know-how into the workplace: "Gen Zers bring with them not only a lifelong experience with the cloud, social media and mobile technology but – because they've known and adapted to this stuff since birth – are also open to more technology, more changes, more adaptations . . . They're on the forefront of augmented reality, green tech, and mental health platforms."^{iv} High school internship programs can help transform the office into a two-way training highway, where different generations learn from each other and establish a true lifelong learning environment.



Developing Mentorship Skills

Many employers hope that existing employees will not only be inspired by young interns to learn new technology, but also develop leadership and mentorship skills along the way. In fact, 83% of ASA survey respondents who offer high school internships rated helping full-time employees develop mentorship skills as an important benefit, making it the second most important benefit behind introducing new skillsets. For businesses that prioritize volunteering and community engagement as part of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, mentoring high school interns in the workplace can be a convenient alternative that supplements or replaces out-of-office activities.

Marketing/Raising Awareness of Brand

For some businesses, a youth internship program isn't just about attracting new talent. Among businesses with an existing high school internship program, 76% rated increasing brand awareness among the key demographic of high school students as an important reason to employ interns. That has been the experience of RTC Communications, a telecommunications company of roughly only 50 employees. "It's helpful for us to be in the schools," explains Todd. "Teenagers are huge consumers of the Internet; they influence their parents and want to buy. So, it plays both ways for us – it is very much a marketing play and not just about career path growth. My CEO wants us to be branded, wants us to be known."

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

Invest Buffalo Niagara

In their role as a nonprofit, privately funded economic development organization representing the eight counties of Western New York, Invest Buffalo Niagara has a front seat view on how regional employers attract new talent. "We support businesses that are either looking to expand in the region or to move to our region," explains Rob Leteste, Business Intelligence and Workforce Manager. "We act as quarterback on navigating a place for them to locate their operations, giving them the data to make the decision, but then also helping them navigate the local ecosystem, such as incentive programs, talent access, etc."

"Buffalo, like most regions, has had a complete turnaround as to the power dynamic," says Rob. "As far as the talent pool goes, we went generations with there being more candidates than jobs available. But recently there has been a true renaissance in Buffalo because of the opportunities and companies exploring our region and moving here, as well as the national dynamics of the labor market shortage coming out of the pandemic. Organizations in Buffalo now need to understand how to act as mentors in the talent development process, beyond just being a consumer of talent that's generated by our workforce ecosystem. Most hiring managers and recruiters were used to being able to find plenty of candidates who were going to be productive day one, with already a lot of experience. We don't have that anymore. We need to be developing the talent and ramp up to productivity."

With manufacturing and logistics as growing industries in the region, Rob also underscored the importance of career pathway awareness and intentional skill-building. "There's definitely a perceived disconnect between the employers and the education system as far as what the skill needs are and what's anticipated for somebody to be a viable candidate at these companies. There's also some blaming on both sides — the education system says the employers aren't engaged enough and the employer side says the education system isn't aligned with their needs. There needs to be more interaction between the two."

Rob observed how European countries are further along than we are, and the potential for American companies to adopt high school internships as operational best practices: "The companies that are thinking about moving here from outside the region and especially ones that we talked to that have a European presence, they do a much better job at this. For example, Odoo, a Belgium-based company that provides a customer relationship management tool, does a good job of accessing our underrepresented talent pools. They're a great partner. They do internship programs over the summer. Other companies from areas like Norway and Canada also understand apprenticeship models better. So, we're going to continue to build this bench of companies that can upskill each other on talent development."

Like Ansley from Wegmans, Rob noted the value of intermediaries: "The CEOs can say they want to do something, but when it gets down to the technician level of the recruiter, the human resource manager, the first line supervisor, they need more help building the scaffolding to make these programs do well. That's where an intermediary can act as scaffold builders, enabling entry level talent to be retained and developed, as well as translators between underrepresented cultures and the employers – helping to facilitate intercultural dialogue. What [companies] could definitely benefit from is capacity support that maybe doesn't sit fully at the organization, but rotates around to a few of those employers, providing that structured mentorship and helping to develop things like standard operating procedures."

Bringing Fresh Perspective

Introducing new, fresh insight and perspective to an organization is another key benefit of welcoming younger students into the workspace. Among ASA survey respondents with high school interns, 82% chose this as a top reason to implement such a program.

Stewart of NVIDIA remembers an instance when high school students brought their unique perspective to the table. “We were meeting with the city of San Jose - the mayor, CEOs, some venture capital folks, and others. A real estate developer was working with the mayor to pull this meeting together at our headquarters and he was connected to the professor at a local high school. They had a conversation that these two students wanted to come, so these two students show up with their professor and at first, they’re just hanging out, acting like kids and you kind of didn’t really know they were paying attention.

But when we sat down for the roundtable after our executive briefing, one of the kids sat at the head of the table, which was fantastic, and the other one sat right next to him. They got their food first and they did everything first. When one of our senior VPs asked what people thought about what they saw, none of the adults raised their hands — but both of the students did. So, we went ahead and let them talk and the way that they were able to clearly articulate what they saw, what they heard and the potential for it raised some eyebrows, because they got it. And that actually then prompted some of the adults to jump in because of the way the students explained it. It’s like, all of a sudden something clicked in the adults. It was fascinating thinking this is the level of students going into these universities and pushing the universities to think different.

“So, for us, it makes us have to think a whole lot harder about how we influence downstream. That may not be an internship right away, but how do we actually get more involved in what it is high schools are doing so students are even more prepared when they get into college? How do we put our subject matter experts in high schools and other kinds of programming so that the students get different kind of exposure from us?”

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Overcoming Common Barriers

Many employers cite a host of common barriers that prevent them from establishing a high school internship program, and even those businesses that have successfully put a program in place face several challenges along the way.

Suitable Work

Forty-three percent of respondents with an existing youth work-based learning program and 50% of those with no program said that determining work assignments for younger interns was the biggest hurdle. As one small suburban business in Michigan, with no high school interns, responded to our survey, “We are in a highly technical and service profession and business and it’s not fair to clients we service to have their business participate in training an unseasoned high schooler.” Another survey respondent, a midsize suburban employer in Georgia that employs college interns, commented, “Our business is very complex, hiring high-powered lawyers around the world. A high schooler could not do a job that would add value.”

But are employers underestimating interns’ abilities? Perhaps these are situations where strength in numbers can add value – bringing groups of students together to solve complex problems for business. District C in North Carolina is a prominent example of this unique model, as they partner with employers to implement ‘teamships’ – high school interns working together on diverse teams supplemented by external coaching from trained educators.

The CAPS (Center for Advanced Professional Studies) Network helps students bring value to their employers through “profession-based learning.” In this model, students work on projects for CAPS industry partners and produce real deliverables that are immediately useful to the employer. Projects are typically those that the business has been unable to prioritize or complete due to a lack of resources, but still fill a legitimate business need. The end result is a win-win for both parties: Students experience the real world while developing both technical and essential skills, and businesses are able to accomplish those tasks that always slip to the bottom of the to-do list while getting insight from youth.

Intermediaries like CAPS and District C, as well as NAF, Big Picture Learning, GSP ED, TIES and dozens of other similar organizations throughout the country, should be relied on to help employers navigate this complex process.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES

M&T Bank

M&T Bank has a well-established robust internship program and a newer modern apprenticeship program – but both are for individuals 18+. “We’ve built the pipeline to start after they graduate high school,” explains Elizabeth Zak, Leadership Program Manager. “So, they graduate and then they join M&T Bank on a part-time basis, and they go to school part-time and work part time for three years. It’s a three-year program that ideally ends in employment with M&T Bank, but they can also choose to complete their bachelor’s degree full-time, or they can take that experience and take it to another company — there are a few different pathways.”

Elizabeth points out that while employees younger than 18 may pose compliance issues for a workplace such as a bank, there are also benefits to onboarding younger workers. “When they come to us, they’re 18 and they’re changing schools, they’re going to college and they’re starting a new job, which is so much change for students who already have an unstable life. It’s just so much at once. And so having them in the high school where they’re already familiar with the people, they’re already familiar with their schedules, and you’re just adding in one thing, the work — it doesn’t seem to be such a hard entry ramp into the program.”

Successful implementation of work-based learning for high school students requires buy-in from the executive level in theory, which then needs to be translated into practice: “Support among senior leaders is always strong but can wane a bit when it comes to actual implementation because it often requires change. For example, at M&T we have an award-winning set of leadership development trainings, but none of our trainings are for an 18-year-old. You have to adjust the trainings because they’re mostly designed for adults who’ve been in the workforce for a little while. So, all of that is something that has to be built.”

A key component of executive level buy-in is articulating the ROI: “Our apprenticeship program is something that I think needs to grow in order for people to understand its importance and to see the benefit. Trying to convince people that something is going to be important in 10 years is so much harder than traditional interns, where you can say, ‘this intern graduated from college and they’re going to get a full time-job at M&T Bank and right away, they’re going to be a contributing member of the team’. What I would like to figure out is how to get the bank to not see this as just charity, or as something we’re doing for the community, but instead as a real workforce development opportunity.”

For organizations seeking to implement internship programs, teamwork is essential: “I would tell them to start with executive support and then have that trickle down to a really strong team of people from different parts of the organization who can support different pillars and can make it happen in the different spaces. We had representatives from Sustainability, HR, Diversity & Inclusion, Finance, Operations, Retail – lots of people at the table to say, can we make this happen? . . . Executive sponsorship can also provide air cover, which you need if you’re going to make something like this because it requires so much of people, requires you to change and so on. Ultimately, it’s worth it and makes for a better company. It makes for a better community. It makes for better employees and a better employee experience – but it does require quite a bit of air cover at the beginning to make it happen.”

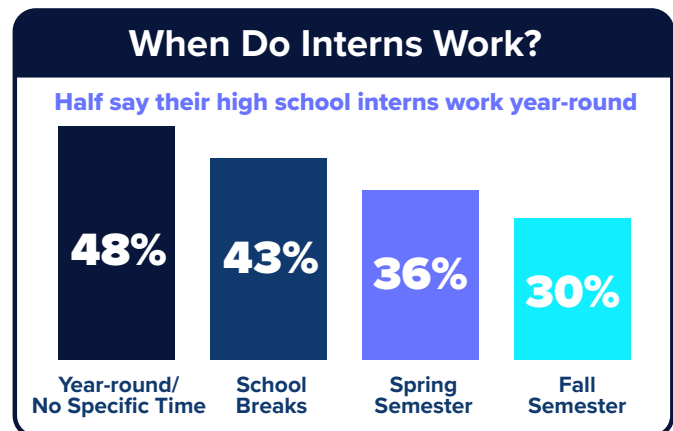
Recruitment

Forty-two percent of survey respondents with an existing work-based learning program cited attracting qualified interns as a major hurdle in program management, while 38% of those businesses without an existing program said it was a major reason preventing program implementation. Even established postsecondary internship programs must work very hard on recruitment. According to Stewart, NVIDIA’s recruitment strategies range from a university recruiting team who performs outreach at the student level at targeted universities, to social media advertising, to senior leaders at NVIDIA who engage with university professors to spread the word about opportunities for their students. “From there it’s just often the social network itself,” adds Stewart. “Word of mouth. People start talking . . . They heard about it from one of their friends who heard about it from one of their friends. Then, what’s happened over the past couple of years, we’ve engaged in larger forums like the Stacked Up Summit from ColorStack, where we can sit in front of 300+ students and talk about what kind of opportunities are here. All of those students then connect with us on LinkedIn and are then part of the ecosystem.”

At the high school level, internship and apprenticeship administrators stress the importance of the job application and interview process. “It’s important to be able to evaluate who’s going to bring the best personality, the

best skill set and be most interested,” says Patrick of RTC Communications. “So, it’s not just teachers assigning students to the apprenticeship. It is a competitive process.” In our survey, of those businesses with a high school internship program, 84% consider a student’s GPA or advanced coursework when extending a job offer; 76% weigh the school reputation or quality; and 76% take into account whether a school is culturally diverse.

Of note, 76% consider requests from employee parents. This has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, existing employees throughout the organization, regardless of rank or role, should feel empowered to participate in or make suggestions about an internship



program and contribute to the future workforce. But recruiting interns based solely or primarily on a parental connection limits access and perpetuates inequity for those who don't have the social capital to request an internship from their relatives. Internship program administrators must carefully monitor the recruitment process to ensure all candidates have an equal chance to qualify.

Often, internship recruitment requires building relationships between industry professionals and school administrators – a daunting task for employers who may not have connections with local schools or the time and resources to make them. Intermediaries or public-private partnerships can play a critical role in alleviating this burden. In Indiana, the nonprofit Regional Opportunity Initiatives works to advance economic and community prosperity in the 11 counties of the Indiana Uplands (Brown, Crawford, Daviess, Dubois, Greene, Lawrence, Martin, Monroe, Orange, Owen, and Washington counties). “ROI does a lot of job and business growth through central and southwest Indiana and they're on the educational side as well,” explains Todd of RTC. “They cut through a lot of the red tape for us When there are available grants, for example, they do all the technical work. And so, there's not a lot I have to do other than sign off on job descriptions and do some evaluations with some great kids. It's not very difficult.”

The North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE) is an example of a business-led, education nonprofit organization that operates out of the Office of the Governor. The organization works to link business leaders and the state's education decision makers to create connections between the education curriculum and the overall work readiness of citizens across the state. In addition to the NCBCE, North Carolina has a system of local advisory councils, which are public-private partnerships that support the planning and development of career and technical education programming, including work-based learning.

Washington state's Career Connect Washington (CCW) is another example of a statewide initiative and public-private partnership that facilitates work-based learning opportunities through a system of regional networks, intermediaries, and local coordinators. Similarly, Iowa's Intermediary Network comprises 15 regional intermediary networks designed to connect business and education by offering work-based learning activities to students in their region. In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Connecting Activities initiative establishes public-private partnerships through 16 local MassHire Workforce Boards to provide work-based learning experiences for students, and in Delaware, the Delaware Technical Community College's (DTCC) Office of Work-based Learning serves as an intermediary between education agencies and business and industry partners to facilitate and scale career-connected learning opportunities across the state.

Other organizations provide support across state lines. The nonprofit CommunityShare, an ASA grantee, has developed a digital platform that gives PK-12 educators access to community partners across the country to create real-world learning opportunities virtually and in-person with students. Local professionals and business owners can share their skills and expertise on the platform so educators can connect and tap them to serve as project collaborators, mentors, guest speakers, field trip or internship hosts, and more. Their growing national network includes communities in Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio, Washington, Tennessee, and the Great Lakes region.

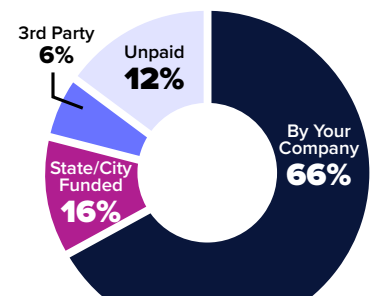
Transportation and Scheduling

Finding high school interns with dependable transportation can be a struggle, especially in more rural locations where schools and businesses are spread out geographically. Among businesses in our survey with a high school internship program, 34% said transportation was a major challenge. One respondent, a small emergency medical service in New Hampshire that employs both high school and college interns, noted, “(We are) limited by small local schools, student interest, and rural area.” Interestingly, in this category there was not a large difference in responses from businesses in urban vs nonurban settings; urban companies, with presumably larger public transportation networks, were only slightly more inclined to report student lack of transportation as a problem (36% vs 32%).

At RTC Communications, it is a requirement of the apprenticeship that the student have their own reliable form of transportation to the job site. But this can limit access to the shrinking population of students who obtain a driver's license. In fact, many states have eliminated drivers education in schools in recent years and the number of 16-year-olds with licenses dropped to 25% in 2021, down from 46% in 1983.^v One solution may be for schools to tap federal and/or state funding to support a district-provided bus. Some larger businesses may also already provide a bus or shuttle for existing employees that could be repurposed to accommodate interns as well.

Working around student schedules can also be problematic, as students

Who Pays Interns?



- **88% say their high school interns are paid**
- **83% say their high school interns receive school credit regardless of pay**
- **73% say their high school interns are both paid and receive school credit**

are often required to be in school during the majority of the 9 to 5 business day. While [prior ASA research](#) found that all states allow work-based learning opportunities to count for credit toward high school graduation, internship administrators still run up against requirements around in-school seat time. As Todd of RTC Communications explains, it is an ongoing issue: “Especially for apprenticeships, we need some flexibility with the high school time, like maybe a four-hour block or even if they can schedule it where they come here one full day. But I know it’s very difficult for the high schools to do that; each state has its own requirements of how long the kids have to be in the (school) chairs.”

In our survey, 39% of businesses with high school interns said scheduling was a challenge. Some businesses (43%) get around scheduling problems by only offering internships during summer vacation or school breaks, but 48% offer work-based learning opportunities year-round.

Some schools, districts and states are beginning to experiment with relaxing in-school seat-time requirements. In [prior ASA research](#), a representative of the South Carolina Department of Education explained that high school superintendents are gradually beginning to consider how traditional schedules impact students doing internships or clinicals. Another example is the nonprofit Big Picture Learning (an ASA grantee), which runs a network of schools that stress the concept of intentionally incorporating into the school day “leaving to learn” opportunities for students, where they can have real-world experiences in a professional environment.

Virtual or remote internships are also potential solutions to transportation and scheduling woes. Many internships switched to virtual during the pandemic out of necessity but since then, employers, educators, program administrators, and policymakers have all recognized that technology can expand student access to work-based learning and help erase transportation and scheduling barriers. One example is the Work-Based Learning Alliance (WBLA), a non-profit delivering mobile-first virtual experiences that meet students where they are. WBLA participants have the flexibility to work synchronously or asynchronously on team projects that solve real business challenges for industry partners. So, while there is still a long way to go before internships can be seamlessly integrated into the high school experience, momentum is building toward systemic change.

Managing Interns

Managing high school interns often requires extra dedication and a deeper level of support on the part of the supervisor; 32% of survey respondents with an existing high school internship program reported it as a challenge. However, many businesses still find the experience worthwhile. “It has been so rewarding for us and not just for them,” commented a

California midsize suburban Information Technology company with both a high school and college internship program. “We value it greatly.” And a representative from another California organization, this one a large urban organization in the finance and insurance sector with both high school and college interns, agrees: “I think more companies should do this. While it can be labor intensive for current employees who are tasked with mentoring, leading, and teaching these students, it can be worth it. It also may be hard to work around the intern’s schedules with school, but it does provide great work experience and education to those students who take it seriously.”

Teaching young interns and apprentices the durable skills that last a lifetime is essential. That often means making a conscious effort to remember their age and lack of experience. “At RTC, we remind each other that these are 16-year-old kids that sometimes have no idea what an alarm clock should mean, and that we need to train and educate on soft skills as well as the technical skills,” says Todd. “Younger apprentices can be inattentive, such as when they get a job done and sit at their desks instead of looking for something to do or take it as an opportunity to get on their phone and start playing games. So sometimes your supervision will need to be a little bit tighter . . . You also need to think about assigning 16-year-old apprentices to long-time employees who have been with your organization for 15 or 20 years and are now in their 40’s or older – how will that fit be? These are the types of things program administrators need to think about.”

Expecting mistakes and keeping an organization’s leaders informed is also key when dealing with young workers. “One of our interns actually made a mapping error, and it took us a couple hours to fix it,” says Todd of RTC. “Not a terribly big deal, but our CEO was made aware of it and knew, OK, it’s a screw up – let’s make sure we’re doing the right thing with the kid, not give them too much, too soon, things like that. But it’s directly impactful to your executive suite so they should know what’s going on and they care, and they’re invested.”

Some work-based learning intermediaries lighten the load of intern supervisors by providing guidelines and standards around their responsibilities. NAF is a national education nonprofit organization that works with public high schools to establish career-themed academies, which combine career-relevant courses and WBL activities to support general education requirements. They provide the NAFTrack Certification to help employers assess students’ internship performance compared to a set of work readiness criteria.^{vi} Similarly, Big Picture Learning’s EmBlaze program helps facilitate the work-based learning process with technology to make it easier for employers and teachers to supervise student interns.

Lack of Funding/Resources

Many employers cite a lack of budget and/or resources as a main obstacle to either establishing a high school internship program or maintaining one. Of those survey respondents with no high school interns, 45% said they lack the people power to onboard them and 38% said they lack the funding to hire qualified candidates. Twenty-eight percent of survey respondents with an existing program, meanwhile, suggested they struggle to secure funding for their interns on an ongoing basis. However, despite these funding challenges, the majority of businesses (88%) offer paid internships and 66% provide the funding themselves, with the remaining 22% typically relying on state or city funding that helps subsidize intern wages.

[Prior ASA research](#) uncovered that just over half of all states offer financial incentives like tax credits to offset high school work-based learning costs on the employer side and encourage businesses to partner with schools to offer work-based learning opportunities. Examples include Delaware's Learning for Careers Initiative, which provides grant funding to engage Delaware's business community in a planning process that results in the creation or expansion of paid work experiences for youth and adult learners in the state; New Jersey's Career Accelerator Internship Program that provides participating employers with up to 50% of wages paid to new interns, up to \$3,000 per student; and the Vermont Training Program, which provides performance-based workforce grants that may cover up to 50% of costs for preemployment training, training for new hires, and training for incumbent workers.

Indiana also reimburses employers 50% of interns' wages up to \$30,000 per year for certain programs. "That is a very good force multiplier and really alleviates some of the financial strain," says Todd of RTC. "Without the pay, the apprenticeship would boil down to almost essentially a job shadow program, but with the pay it becomes an opportunity to task them and make them a little bit accountable for what they're doing, reward them, and give them some buy-in. And the reimbursement from the state goes a long way, especially with my CFO."

“““

If I was to sit in front of a lawmaker right now, I would ask them to think about how to 'de-risk' the ability to do experiential learning and experiential internships for students . . . I'm not saying get rid of the law, but figure out how to make it a little bit easier on industry to do good.

Policy Recommendations

Local, state, and federal policy can play an important role in reducing the barriers to youth work-based learning and creating the right conditions to ensure as many students as possible can access and thrive in high-quality career-connected learning experiences. The business sector can serve as a powerful advocate and ally in helping to bring about systemic change that will better support employers in the recruitment and management of high school interns. Businesses may want to engage policymakers on:

Financial incentives. Research shows that students benefit more from paid vs unpaid internships, both in the short- and long-term. Many students simply cannot afford to take on an unpaid internship (and do not have the time for both an unpaid internship and a part-time job), and studies show that paid interns see a boost in first-job salaries.^{vii} Businesses can encourage

policymakers to offer tax credits or wage subsidies to offset costs on the employer side and encourage businesses to partner with schools to offer work-based learning opportunities. These types of benefits are most often associated with registered apprenticeships, but a few states, like Delaware and New Jersey, have broadened their programs to include other types of career-connected learning experiences.

Intermediaries and industry-government partnerships.

Businesses can encourage policymakers to provide funding for and/or establish intermediaries that can alleviate much of the administrative and logistical burdens associated with running a high school internship program. For example, the Delaware Technical Community College's Office of Work-based Learning serves as an intermediary between education agencies and business and industry partners to facilitate and scale career-connected learning opportunities across the state. Staff from the DTCC work with school districts, employers, and community-based organizations to expand and build upon regional employer engagement and help to coordinate the supply and demand of work-based learning opportunities. Employers can also serve on local or regional councils and workgroups, often comprised of industry professionals, government representatives, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders, to become more involved in education-workforce issues in

their community. An example is North Carolina, which has a system of local advisory councils that are public-private partnerships and support the planning and development of CTE programming, including work-based learning.

Finally, public funds should continue to support the many high-quality non-profit intermediaries, some listed in this report, that are working to facilitate these experiences between students and employers. These organizations do an outstanding job to take the burden off of employers so that they can provide career-connected learning while simultaneously focusing on their business needs.

Address existing laws or regulations. In several states, laws and regulations around safety, liability, child labor, or workers' compensation can be obstacles to employing youth below a specific age. To be sure, there can be legitimate concerns: 35% of ASA survey respondents with no high school interns said their workplace posed a risk to a high schooler's safety. Policymakers can be encouraged to review existing rules and make sure they strike a balance so that youth are both protected and able to take advantage of real-world learning opportunities. In New Jersey, for example, one of the major barriers to work-based learning was ensuring students could participate in a safe working environment. In response, the state launched the New Jersey Safe Schools Project, a collaboration between the NJ Department of Education and Rutgers University, to mitigate liability concerns for schools and employers as well as improve the workplace conditions of students. As Stewart of NVIDIA explains, "If I was to sit in front of a lawmaker right now, I would ask them to think about how to 'de-risk' the ability to do experiential learning and experiential internships for students . . . I'm not saying get rid of the law, but figure out how to make it a little bit easier on industry to do good."

Paths to Action

In addition to advocacy, businesses looking to create or enhance a high school internship program can take these concrete steps to get started:

Evaluate the ROI. To determine whether a high school internship program is right for your organization, weigh the benefits against investment and think of your long-term talent needs. "You're often investing in your company through computers, vehicles, and facilities, but we all know that the number one cost of an employer is our personnel," points out Todd of RTC. "So, we want to have the right personnel and train the right way. We know that the era of someone being employed 20, 30 or 40 years is probably long gone, but if we have these kids from 16 to 25 to 30, that's a good investment. First-year turnover rate can hit 50% or 60%. It's very

expensive, it's very costly. It's a heck of a headache and with interns or apprentices, you have almost a two- to four- year interview process, because there's no mandate to hire these boys or girls after their experience ends. So, it's a no strings attached program that lessens the employer's risk, allows us to grow our personnel, and gives us great community standing that we're able to advertise to our local communities that we're investing in our communities, investing in the education of the kids."

Start building relationships. If a business has the resources, reach out to local schools, community organizations, afterschool programs, or other stakeholders who serve youth. Or, research intermediaries or existing coalitions in the local region who can assist with making connections. Local workforce development boards and chambers of commerce can be good resources to kickstart the process. "The shortest, best advice is start somewhere," says Stewart of NVIDIA. "That's typically building relationships in the community – not solely giving money. And remember your long-term goals; you have to be more of a visionary looking downstream. You probably need to have a five- to 10- year outlook on where the company's going in order to truly understand where your talent is coming from, and how you can actually impact and change your company's influence on not only the country, but the lives of families."

Build internal support and a welcoming culture. While engaging the external community is a pivotal first step in building an internship program, creating the right internal culture should not be overlooked. In our survey, nearly 30% of respondents with an existing high school internship program felt that sustaining internal support for the program was a challenge. Additionally, 26% of businesses with an existing program, and 29% of those without, agreed that it was difficult to cultivate an inclusive, welcoming environment for the interns. Start by educating peers and leaders about the benefits of an internship program, providing resources and tips on engaging youth, or initiating training on creating inclusion and belonging. And remember that initiating and maintaining an internship program doesn't necessarily have to lie within Human Resources. "These conversations can happen organically, and the sources may not be standardized," points out Professor Hernandez-Gantes. "Champions of ideas can emerge from a variety of areas. It could be somebody in human resources, the VP for a large corporation or the owner of a small company who takes it upon themselves to establish change in their surrounding environment to develop an ecology of support . . . who may be the linchpin to make things happen may vary across the board."

Conclusion

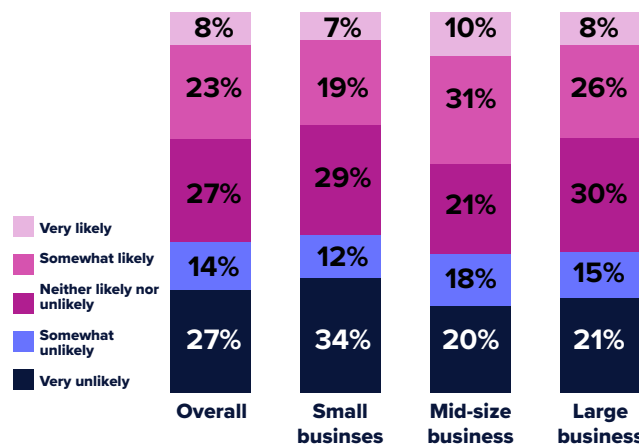
Signs are pointing in the right direction for an expansion of high school internships and apprenticeships across the country. One-third of survey respondents say their organization is likely to start a program, particularly midsize to large companies in urban areas. As one survey respondent put it, “We should pay more attention to high school internships and provide students with practical experience.” Said another: “High school students should be given the chance to experience the workforce and gain the insights and knowledge to make decisions based on their

prior experiences. It would help them in choosing a career driven by passion and not a 9 to 5.”

Increased funding, staffing and external help with intern recruitment can all be powerful motivators. With the proper supports in place, businesses can transform from passive consumers of talent to instead active producers, creating a skilled, resilient workforce able to weather the disruptions – be it AI, climate change, pandemics or more – that no doubt lie ahead.

While one third say their firm might start a high school internship program, one quarter say it is very unlikely; two thirds say their firm never had a high school internship.

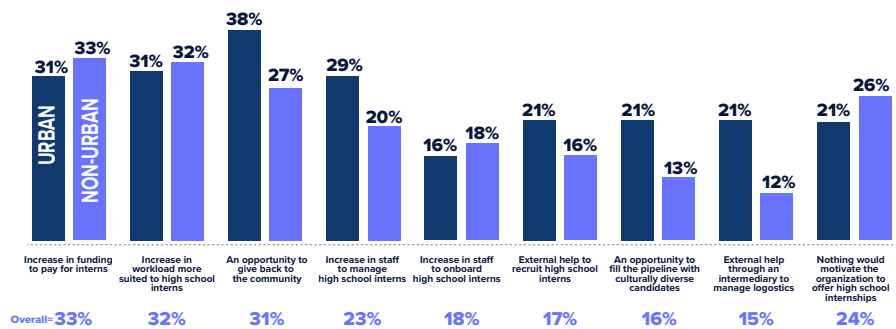
Likelihood To Start a High School Program



Organizations in non-urban areas are less likely to start a high school program (27% vs 38%), as are small businesses (25% vs 38% mid/large).

An increase in funding, a more suitable workload, and an opportunity to give back to the community are the top three things that might motivate an organization to start a high school program.

Motivators to Start a High School Internship Program



End Notes

- ⁱ Jean Eddy, *Crisis-Proofing Today's Learners Reimagining Career Education to Prepare Kids for Tomorrow's World* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2023), pp. Chapter 8, endnote 5
- ⁱⁱ *Challenges and Resources Needed: National Internship Measurement, 2018 & High School Internships: 2023 Survey of Employers*, American Student Assistance
- ⁱⁱⁱ *High School Work-based Learning: Best Practices Designed to Improve Career Readiness Outcomes for Today's Youth*, American Student Assistance, 2022, https://asa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ASA_WBLPlaybook_Final.pdf
- ^{iv} Gene Marks, "Gen Z workers are more confident, diverse and tech-savvy but still lack experience," *The Guardian* (December 5, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/05/gen-z-workers-confident-diverse-tech-savvy>
- ^v Caitlin Gibson, "Why aren't teenagers driving anymore?," *The Washington Post* (February 21, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/parenting/2023/02/21/teens-not-driving/>
- ^{vi} Martha Ross, Richard Kazis, Nicole Bateman, and Laura Stateler, Metropolitan Policy Center at Brookings, "Work-Based Learning Can Advance Equity and Opportunity for America's Young People," 2022, 20201120_BrookingsMetro_Work-based-learning_Final_Report.pdf
- ^{vii} *The Power of Work-Based Learning*, Strada Education Foundation, 2022, <https://stradaeducation.org/report/pv-release-march-16-2022/>