

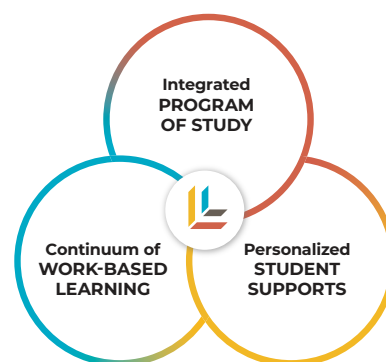
Work-based Learning in High School Pathways



The Linked Learning approach prepares all students for success in college and career through the thoughtful integration of rigorous academics and career technical education with world-of-work experiences—all backed by comprehensive support services that meet students where they are. Linked Learning is delivered through educational pathways tied to a local industry sector. This research-proven framework recognizes that students learn best when academic content connects to real-world applications and when they can envision how their education leads to meaningful career opportunities.

Work-based learning is one of the three primary elements of this approach, provided in partnership with local employers to help students make meaning of classroom learning, inspire academic and career choices, and develop essential professional skills. These authentic workplace connections transform abstract concepts into tangible understanding while building the interpersonal and technical competencies that define readiness for college and career.

Work-based learning achieves maximum impact as part of an integrated whole. Coherent, high-quality Linked Learning pathways are shown to improve outcomes for diverse student populations through extensive third-party research. As the Golden State Pathways Program modeled on Linked Learning provides historic new resources for building college and career preparation pathways across California, achieving the coherence and quality that drive results will be essential to success.



About this guide: The Linked Learning Alliance offers this guide to help pathway leads, work-based learning coordinators, and school district administrators develop comprehensive work-based learning programs that serve their students well.

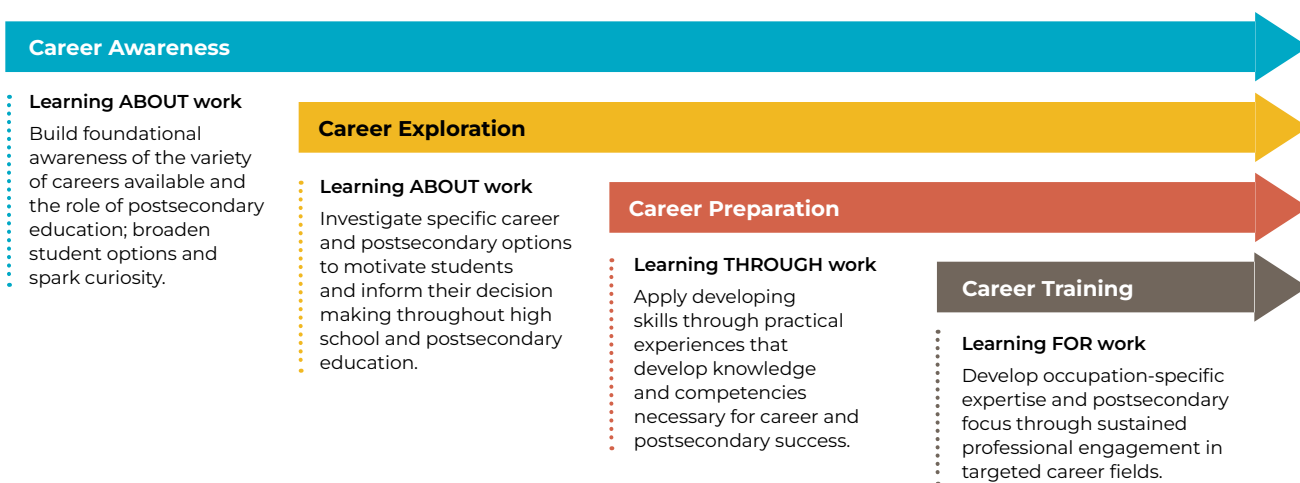
WHAT IS WORK-BASED LEARNING?

Work-based learning encompasses educational experiences that connect classroom instruction to authentic workplace environments and professional practices. While these experiences range from guest speakers and workplace visits to paid internships and on-the-job training, effective work-based learning is distinguished by:

- **Professional interactions** that expose students to industry standards and workplace culture
- **Authentic work activities** that demonstrate real-world applications of academic learning
- **Intentional connections** to classroom instruction that deepen and extend student understanding
- **Progressive skill development** that builds toward career readiness and professional competency

A progression of high-value experiences

Successful work-based learning programs integrate seamlessly with other Linked Learning elements while building systematically along a developmental continuum. This four-phase progression, adapted from Long Beach Unified School District, provides a strategic framework for experiences that help students build career awareness, explore interests, prepare for professional engagement, and train for specific occupations.



The sections that follow provide detailed guidance, examples, and resources to support implementation of each phase, helping educators create coherent programs that prepare students for success in college, career, and life.

CAREER AWARENESS

Target timing: 9th grade

Career awareness experiences introduce students to the breadth of career possibilities available to them, helping them discover connections between their interests, academic subjects, and future opportunities they may never have considered. Career awareness activities are supported by educators and other adults to prompt students' thinking, encourage reflection, and help students place these experiences in the context of their own lives and aspirations.

Career awareness activities often take place at school sites and in the classroom, bringing the professional world and relevant career topics into the young person's environment. While these experiences may also take place at the workplace, in any setting, the focus should be on providing broad exposure to professionals and a particular industry.

DEFINING FEATURES	KEY EXPERIENCES	SAMPLE OUTCOMES
• One-time interactions with industry partners, typically addressing groups of students • Accessible, low-commitment opportunities that welcome all students regardless of prior career knowledge • Adult-facilitated experiences designed to spark curiosity and expand students' conception of what's possible	• Guest speaker presentations connecting curriculum to real-world applications • Workplace tours showcasing day-to-day operations and career pathways • Career fairs featuring local employers in high-opportunity industries • Parent and community member work visits highlighting diverse career stories	• Student can articulate the types of postsecondary education and training required in the career field and its importance to success in that field • Student can identify a few programs or pathways offered at the high school that align with career interests • Student can describe an aspect of a job or industry they previously did not understand

CAREER AWARENESS SCENARIO



Maria, a 9th-grader in the Health Sciences pathway, had always been interested in helping people but wasn't sure about specific healthcare careers when she attended a career fair featuring local medical professionals. During the two-hour event, she spoke with a physical therapist, a medical technician, and a hospital administrator about their daily responsibilities and educational backgrounds. Through these conversations, Maria discovered that healthcare careers require different types of skills—from hands-on patient care to data analysis—and that many roles she'd never considered could match her interests in both science and working with people. This experience led Maria to sign up for anatomy and physiology the following year and request a job shadow with the physical therapy clinic.

CAREER EXPLORATION

Target timing: 10th grade – 12th grade

Career exploration experiences deepen students' understanding of specific industries and occupations, moving beyond general awareness to focused investigation of career paths that align with their emerging interests. Career exploration activities during early high school years are especially important because students may be starting to select a particular industry-related pathway and making choices about course sequences that can impact their learning trajectory. Students can also participate in and revisit career exploration activities in the 11th and 12th grades to learn about subsectors related their pathway focus or explore an entirely new field or occupation.

Career exploration activities are versatile and scalable, and they can be implemented at relatively low-cost. For example, they can range from efficient virtual engagements to more intensive experiences that educators and industry professionals plan and implement together—like an annual company-wide job shadow, or several informational interviews with employees across a company and its roles.

DEFINING FEATURES	KEY EXPERIENCES	SAMPLE OUTCOMES
• One-time experiences with industry partners, typically for individual students or small groups • Personalized interactions that connect with emerging student interests • Student takes an active role in shaping the experience • Focused depth in particular career fields rather than broad exposure • Attention to development of students' professional communication and inquiry skills	• Informational interviews with professionals in roles of interest • Virtual exchanges and mentoring relationships with industry partners • Industry-specific workplace visits with targeted learning objectives • Job shadowing experiences enabling in-depth workplace observation	• Student can give at least two examples of how their individual skills and interests relate to the featured career field and/or occupations • Student can articulate in a broad sense, what jobs and industries they are curious to learn more about as well as ones they less interested in exploring at this time • Student can communicate observations about different occupations <i>Adapted from The Center for Career Development at Princeton University.</i>

CAREER EXPLORATION SCENARIO



Jason, a 10th-grader in the Engineering pathway, was curious about robotics but unsure about different engineering specialties when he had an informational interview with a robotics engineer at a local manufacturing company. During their 45-minute conversation, Jason asked specific questions about daily tasks, educational requirements, and career advancement while touring the facility to see automated systems in action. Through this experience, Jason discovered that robotics engineering combines mechanical design with computer programming and that the engineer's problem-solving approach directly connected to concepts from his physics and computer science classes. This experience led Jason to seek out additional conversations with software engineers and request a summer job shadow focused on automation technology.

CAREER PREPARATION

Target timing: 11th grade – 12th grade

Effective career preparation sets up students for success in postsecondary education and future careers. Career preparation activities typically take place in the later high school years, which makes it possible to build on relationships students have cultivated with local employers and industry leaders throughout their pathway journey.

Career preparation experiences help students make informed decisions about further education and credentials while building portfolios of experience that strengthen college applications and entry-level job prospects.

DEFINING FEATURES	KEY EXPERIENCES	SAMPLE OUTCOMES
• Sustained, direct partnerships with industry professionals • Application of transferable professional skills valued across a variety of careers • Activities have value beyond success in the classroom • Mutual benefit for student and employer partner	• Integrated projects addressing authentic workplace challenges • Student-run enterprises providing goods or services to real customers • Virtual enterprise simulations with industry mentorship • Leadership roles in industry-connected student organizations • Service-learning projects meeting community needs • Compensated internships with structured learning components	• Student demonstrates professional collaboration skills, working effectively with diverse teams and contributing meaningfully to shared goals • Student can articulate specific goals for future internships and longer work-based learning opportunities during high school • Student can compare a variety of work-and-learn opportunities

CAREER PREPARATION SCENARIO



Aisha, an 11th-grader in the Business pathway, had developed strong communication skills and interest in marketing when she joined a student team tasked with creating a social media campaign for a local nonprofit organization. Over six weeks, Aisha collaborated with classmates and the nonprofit's marketing director to research target audiences, develop content strategies, and measure engagement metrics for their campaign promoting community health resources. Through this project, Aisha discovered how market research principles from her business classes applied to real audience analysis and learned to balance creative messaging with data-driven decision making. This experience led Aisha to apply for a paid summer internship with the organization and add a digital marketing course to her senior year schedule.

CAREER TRAINING

Target timing: 12th grade

Career training experiences are most often paid positions where students apply specialized skills that directly advance employer objectives while developing occupation-specific expertise. These experiences generally extend over months and may continue as open-ended jobs beyond high school graduation. Career training opportunities often include industry-recognized certifications and credentials that qualify students for specific roles or projects, including those requiring state or federal compliance.

Prepared by earlier phases of the work-based learning continuum, students should enter the career training phase with well-developed professional skills and clear career direction. When students have thoroughly explored their interests and built relationships within their chosen industry sector, they are better positioned to make informed commitments to the intensive training experiences in this phase, which can guide their postsecondary learning and launch their professional careers.

DEFINING FEATURES	KEY EXPERIENCES	SAMPLE OUTCOMES
• Extended engagements spanning multiple months or continuing post-graduation • Primary focus on employer benefit with student learning integrated into real work • Development of occupation-specific skills and technical expertise • Completion of industry-recognized certifications and professional credentials • Preparation for immediate workforce entry or advanced postsecondary training	• Job entry internships with clear pathways to employment • Apprenticeships combining skill-building and instruction • Clinical experiences in healthcare or human services practice • Structured on-the-job training programs with industry partners • Work experience positions with mentorship and skill development component	• Student demonstrates job-ready competencies specific to a range of occupations in their career field of interest • Student earns certifications or credentials that support entry and advancement into an industry • Student can articulate a concrete educational and professional plan spanning the next two to five years

CAREER TRAINING SCENARIO



Marcus, a 12th-grader in the Advanced Manufacturing pathway, had completed coursework in machining and CAD design when he began a paid apprenticeship with a precision parts manufacturer that supplies aerospace companies. Over eight months, Marcus worked 20 hours per week operating CNC machines, learning quality control protocols, and contributing to actual production orders while earning industry safety certifications. Through this sustained experience, Marcus mastered technical skills that directly supported the company's operations while discovering his strength in troubleshooting complex manufacturing problems and mentoring newer apprentices. This experience led Marcus to accept a full-time position with the company after graduation and enroll in evening classes toward an engineering technology degree.

PLANNING AN EFFECTIVE, WELL-INTEGRATED WORK-BASED LEARNING OFFERING

More than 15 years of Linked Learning practice and a decade-long study following a cohort of nine Linked Learning school districts point to the importance of carefully integrating and supporting work-based learning alongside other academic elements and structural supports. To do this well, it's critical to develop a strong team, infrastructure, program, and focus.

TEAM

- Clear work-based learning leadership roles and responsibilities
- Training and ongoing support for qualified work-based learning staff
- Strategic outreach and sustained communication channels with industry and community partners
- Recognition and resources for participating educators, partners, and students

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Success indicators and systems for assessing, monitoring, and managing program effectiveness
- Supportive data and technology platforms that facilitate coordination and tracking
- Appropriate legal and liability management protocols

PROGRAM

- Robust mix of student experiences that progress systematically along the work-based learning continuum
- Intentional curricular connections that reinforce and extend classroom instruction
- Proactive supports ensuring equitable access to work-based learning opportunities for all students

FOCUS

- Shared vision articulating the purpose and benefits of work-based learning across all stakeholders
- Clear alignment between work-based learning experiences and student learning outcomes



ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE THROUGH GOLD CERTIFICATION

Gold Certification represents the highest quality standard for Linked Learning pathways, demonstrating fidelity to research-backed programmatic features that drive positive student outcomes. Work-based learning in Gold-Certified pathways is distinguished by:

- Work-based learning plans across a continuum of experiences equitably accessible to all students, articulated with the program of study curriculum and academic outcomes, informed by industry partners, and personalized to each student as needed
- Student self-assessments of a range of work-based learning experiences that promote reflection, feedback, and continuous pathway improvement
- Workplace readiness assessments completed by industry partners to gauge the quality of student preparation and engagement in work-based learning activities, and generate feedback for use by students, instructors, and pathway administrators

Learn more at [LinkedLearning.org/Certification](https://linkedlearning.org/Certification).



The **Linked Learning Alliance** accelerates the adoption of high-quality Linked Learning pathways by supporting effective practice, policy, and communications. To learn more about work-based learning, the Linked Learning approach, or the Alliance, please visit linkedlearning.org or email us at info@linkedlearning.org.