

# REAL PRACTICAL POLICIES FOR REAL-WORLD LEARNING

Lessons from America's  
New Business Plan



## A CHANGING WORKFORCE:

The nation's workforce demands look vastly different today than they did just a few years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic challenges, and complex technological developments across all industries continue to change the way America works. The pandemic forced the country to re-think its supply chain strategy, pivoting from a system of interdependence to re-investing in domestic production. Similarly, economic challenges, such as inflation, are fueling demand for higher-paying jobs that are typically reserved for those with specialized skill sets.<sup>1</sup> On top of that, the groundswell of Web3, artificial intelligence, and financial technological tools being integrated into our daily lives demands that the next generation of workers be well-equipped to navigate these developments in the workforce.<sup>2</sup>

## GROWING PAINS – MODERN WORKFORCE CHALLENGES:

Unfortunately, labor market demand has not coincided with similar shifts in our education systems, leaving today's youth unprepared to enter the workforce upon receiving their high school degree and, in some cases, even bachelor's or graduate degrees. Instead, an over-emphasis on higher education as the gold standard has led to a workforce vacuum in which students lack real-world skills upon graduation. Policymakers must meet the moment by improving workforce programs and practices to tackle the greatest workforce challenges in recent times – this brief provides some recommendations on how to do just that.

## POLICY IN PRACTICE:

In 2018, after a series of intentional working groups and community listening, the Kansas City education and business community launched a regional initiative called Real World Learning. This initiative connects 32 districts and charters together to support one another in advancing their students to all graduate with a Market Value Asset (MVA), comprised of work experience, 9+ hours of college credit, a regionally relevant industry-recognized credential, and/or entrepreneurial experience.

This document is part of Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's deep dive series. Much of the policy included in this document is largely attributed to America's New Business Plan. Additional information on policies priorities can be found at <https://www.startsupnow.org/anbp>.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "Understanding America's Labor Shortage,"  
<sup>2</sup> Dwyer, "Web 3.0 Is Here to Disrupt The Way We Work,"

This regional initiative has influenced state policy in Missouri, contributing to the formation of a Success-Ready Student Network statewide, through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO-DESE). This network of school districts and education partners, including higher education, engages stakeholders (e.g. business community, parents, students) in designing and implementing personalized competency-based learning. The network collaborates with MO-DESE to create a comprehensive assessment and accountability system that supports every student to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be high school, college, career, and workplace ready.

**REAL WORLD EXAMPLE: In 2022, Missouri legislators passed School Innovation Waivers and Competency-Based high school credits, providing district leaders from across the state the opportunity to apply for waivers, creating district-led models for alternative assessments and competency-based learning in their schools.**

## WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO?

To counteract today's workforce challenges, we must work to encourage young adults to pursue careers that are more sustainable, higher paying, and forward-thinking. To do so, federal policymakers should:

- **Reauthorize the full Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, which is the nation's most critical workforce training program funding bill, prioritizing creative solutions to reverse the decline of workers leaving high school ready to fill specialized roles. This essential piece of legislation has not been updated since its enactment almost a decade ago and does not fully reflect today's labor market or lessons learned.
- **Reauthorize the National Apprenticeship Act to expand apprenticeship programs in high-growth fields and occupations**, prioritizing models that lead to growth of underrepresented students in high-growth, living-wage careers. This is an important first step in setting our economy up for the future.<sup>3</sup>
- **Increase the Pell Grant program's flexibility** to be used for qualifying industry-recognized credential training programs, not just 2–4-year degree programs.
- **Incentivize state-level departments of education to provide districts flexibility in funding, credit, and curriculum to allow students to obtain real-world learning experiences** (also called work-based learning) and industry-recognized credentials. These credentials are assets that are immediately market-valued, created through client- and community-based projects, entrepreneurial experiences, and internships.
- **Examine how state agencies can better collaborate to allow for alternative teacher certification pathways, career pathway specialists, and aligned workforce and education efforts.** This can provide students with access to professionals in their area of interest. Additionally, explore teacher residency models as a pathway to bring real-world expertise into certified positions.
- **Invest in state pre-K to workforce data systems (P20W) to evaluate outcomes with greater precision.** Currently, these data systems do not always talk to each other across all parts of the education, training, and workforce continuum. This makes it difficult for states to move beyond data for compliance to supporting high-quality, relevant, and actionable research. This is critical, as a holistic understanding of student results and workforce outcomes can drive further investment and support innovative education and training models that are creating more pathways toward good or prosperous jobs.

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<sup>3</sup> Jobs for the Future, "How to Achieve an Equitable Economic Recovery for America"