



Career Connected Learning

Building an Equity-Focused Education-to-Workforce System in Washington State

June 2019

At a Glance

This brief, developed by JFF and Washington STEM, is a guide for policymakers, education leaders, and business and industry stakeholders to better understand career connected learning: what it is, its benefits, why it matters, and how to support efforts to build and scale a career connected learning system in Washington state.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works. www.jff.org

About Washington STEM

Washington STEM is a statewide, independent nonprofit organization headquartered in Seattle, WA. Launched in 2011 and founded on the principles of equity, partnership, and sustainability, Washington STEM seeks smart, scalable solutions that lead to opportunities for those students most underserved and underrepresented in STEM fields. www.washingtonstem.org

Bridging the Gap Between Learning and Career

The economy in Washington state is rapidly changing and the skills, competencies, and experiences that *all* young people need to succeed today and into the future are also rapidly changing. The traditional framework of school-then-college-then-job is no longer sufficient; there is a need to move beyond this, toward a new paradigm that blurs the lines between these three domains and advances the academic and career success of all young people, especially those who are often furthest from opportunity—youth of color and youth in low income communities.

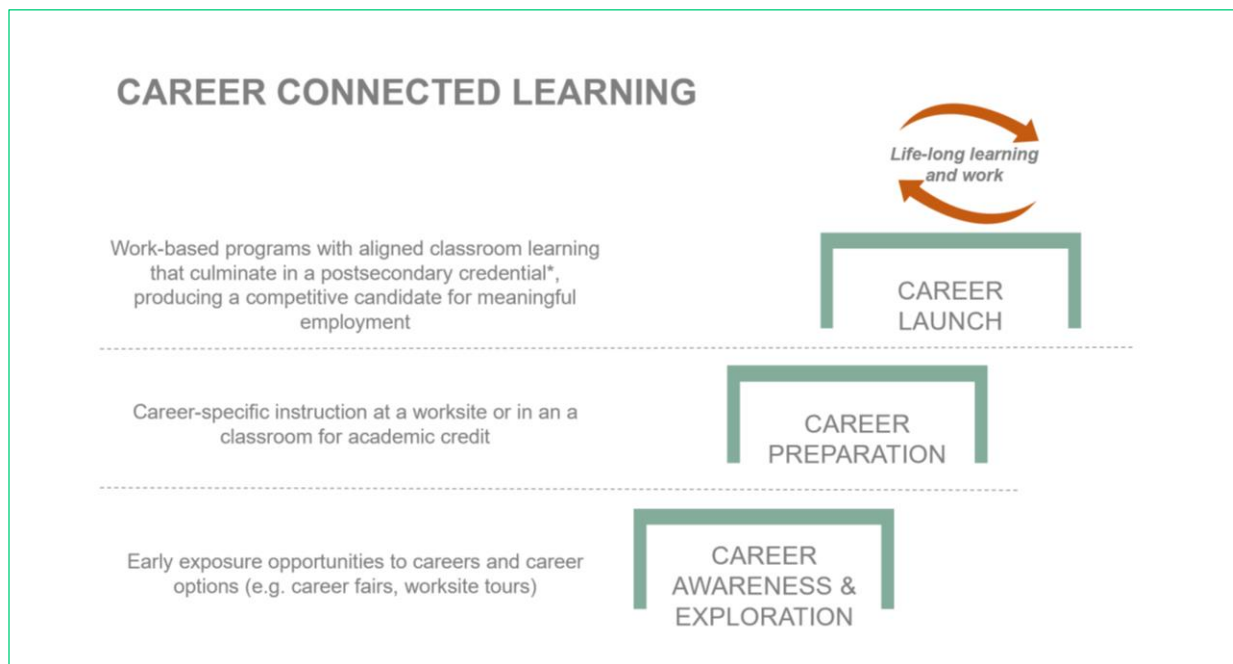
This is critical work given the disparities we see in high school graduation rates among students in Washington: while 81.5 percent of white students in the class of 2017 graduated within four years of starting high school, the graduation rates are markedly lower for their Latinx (72.7 percent), Black (71.5 percent), and Native American (60.3 percent) peers.¹ These inequities in educational attainment dramatically affect students' access to the types of postsecondary education and training that will prepare them to obtain meaningful employment in a changing economy. They also present a barrier for Washington's businesses and industry sectors to welcoming youth—and the valuable perspectives, assets, and creativity they bring with them—into the workplace and building a diverse and agile workforce that is able to innovate and develop solutions in Washington's new economy.

What is needed—especially for students too often left behind by our education and workforce system—is a model that, by design, *connects and integrates* K-12 education, postsecondary education, and career-focused learning so that classroom-based instruction is paired with relevant, meaningful work experiences. **Career connected learning** is a continuum of career opportunities that starts in early grades with career awareness and exploration and continues through high school and beyond with career preparation and career launch experiences (*see Figure 1*).²

“Career connected learning opportunities are essential to advancing equity in all Washington state communities. By exposing young people to a broad variety of careers, by showing them the path forward, and by supporting their education and training needs, we can connect young people of color to high-quality jobs across industries. Education and training options give youth and families needed ways to explore the future.”

-Michelle Merriweather, President & CEO, Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle

Figure 1



These opportunities build upon one another, are iterative, and continue through the attainment of postsecondary degrees and credentials. This approach is critical given the estimate of over 740,000 openings of family-wage jobs in Washington by 2023 and that 77 percent of those jobs will require credentialing beyond high school. However, currently, **only 36 percent of Washington’s students are on track to earn a credential or degree beyond high school.**³ Career connected learning is a strategy to bridge the gap between educational and workforce outcomes for Washington’s youth.

About Career Connect Washington

With the passage of HB 2158 and the launch of **Career Connect Washington** in 2019, Washington is taking a big step towards the goal of ensuring that every student in the state has equitable access to a range of career connected learning opportunities. Career Connect Washington—a consortium of business, education, labor, and government leaders—is paving the way to scale career connected learning through a comprehensive statewide system to ensure that “every young adult in Washington will have multiple pathways toward economic self-sufficiency and fulfillment.”

Gaining access to employment is only one part of what is needed for young people who are economically disadvantaged, students of color, and/or first-generation college-going students to be able to support themselves. There are many structural and systemic barriers that prevent these historically underrepresented populations from gaining *equitable* access to the same opportunities, such as building social capital and developing social networks, that are likely to be more readily available to their white and/or wealthier peers.

“We have to make changes in our education system that allow our families and kids to visualize their path forward and to have local employers be able to recruit and train their workforce in novel ways. Career Connect Washington brings together business, labor, government, and education leaders so that young people have the education and skills needed to connect with high-demand, family-wage careers across Washington and in the Yakima Valley.”

-Kevin Chase, Superintendent of Educational Service District 105 (Yakima Valley)

By providing a set of sequenced and structured opportunities to introduce young people to the world of work early in their educational experiences, career connected learning builds their social networks, helps them make sustained connections, and fosters an understanding of workplace power dynamics, norms and cultures, and spoken and unspoken employee expectations. Career connected learning develops young people’s workplace navigation skills and strategically leverages their education and training so they can be successful in employment contexts in which the norms, values, culture, and expectations may not be not explicit. Similarly, career connected learning supports employers to develop inclusive workplace cultures that embrace workers from diverse backgrounds and with a variety of experiences that enrich industry through new and creative ideas about solving some of our most challenging problems.

A Win-Win Scenario

Career connected learning, by design, supports and benefits both young people *and* employers, bridging the gap that has historically existed in our nation’s education-to-workforce pipeline. In particular, career connected learning supports young people to:

- Complete high school and persist through completion of postsecondary education
- Make informed choices about their educational and career trajectories
- Access meaningful and relevant real-world learning experiences where they cultivate and apply employability and technical skills in real-world settings

- Develop strong social and communication skills, self-awareness, self-confidence, and positive attitudes about the future
- Be well-positioned to obtain industry-sought credentials in high-growth, high-wage careers and advance on a path to launch their careers and/or obtain further education ^{4,5}

At the same time, career connected learning creates a talented pool of local young professionals that is reflective of the changing demographics in the state and who have the education and experience employers need when hiring. By participating in such a system, employers will:

- Develop and access a talent pool that is prepared to meet their current and future needs
- Improve employee retention and reduce training costs
- Welcome a more diverse workforce that is representative of Washington's changing demographics and reflective of their customers/clients
- Build a culture of life-long learning among youth who are passionate about their career choices
- Be well-positioned to meet changing industry needs in the new economy ^{6,7}

The promise of career connected learning is that it bridges old divides and offers an innovative, integrated way to think about our future workforce that meets the needs of Washington's young people, business and industry sectors, and economy. It offers *all* young people systematic opportunities to connect how learning in the classroom applies in the real world and to understand the spoken and unspoken rules of the workplace, while leaving open the door for further education. Concurrently, it ensures that employers can partner with secondary and postsecondary educational institutions to help create a strong, homegrown talent pipeline of young people who are ready to enter the workforce with the skills and competencies that employers value and seek.

Call to Action

The success of career connected learning in Washington will be evident when we attain equitable pathways that provide all students access to the competencies and in-demand credentials that allow them to launch rewarding careers and earn family-sustaining wages. This will require collaboration and advocacy among stakeholders from government, K-12 school systems, postsecondary institutions, employers, and workforce boards—work already underway across the state in regional Washington STEM Networks. Your support for the HB 2158 legislation and the work of Career Connect Washington is critical and will result in a system that not only propels improved education and workforce outcomes for Washington youth, but also sets the stage for a strong local workforce to carry Washington's economy into the 21st Century.

How Can You Support Career Connected Learning?

A first place to start is to connect with your regional [Washington STEM Network](#) to learn more about this work and how you can participate in efforts already underway such as Career Connect Washington. See below for more ways you can support career connected learning.

If you're a government (federal, state, or local) leader or stakeholder:

- Convene employers and industry associations to understand their current and future hiring needs
- Advocate for policies that break down silos across the education-to-workforce continuum (e.g., data and information sharing)

If you're a K-12 school system leader or stakeholder:

- Build a continuum of work-based learning opportunities that can be embedded in the larger career connected learning system
- Provide professional development for school counselors to ensure they share local industry information with students (e.g., skills, competencies, salary, advancement prospects, etc.)

If you're a postsecondary leader or stakeholder:

- Build partnerships with K-12 leaders to better connect early college course taking with in-demand credentials
- Connect with employers to better understand their current and future hiring needs and better align credential offerings

If you're a business leader or employer:

- Offer meaningful, relevant work-based learning opportunities at your workplace
- Build connections with secondary and postsecondary institutions and systems to share information on key skills and competencies needed in your industry

Endnotes

¹ Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, “Graduation and Dropout Statistics 2018,” <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/pubdocs/GradDropout/16-17/2016-17GraduationDropoutStatisticsAnnualReport.pdf>

² Career Connect Washington, “The Career Connect Washington Plan,” 2018, https://careerconnectwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CCWA_17x11_ifold_tabloid_110718_rev2.pdf

³ Jenée Myers Twitchell, Mikel Poppe, Elizabeth Meza, Lana Huizar, William Zumeta, “STEM By the Numbers: Equity and Opportunity in Washington’s Regions,” 2019, Washington STEM, https://washingtonstem.org/focus_area/stembythenumbers/

⁴ Career Connect Washington, “An Introduction,” 2019, <https://careerconnectwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CCWA-fact-sheet.January-9.pdf>

⁵ Chris Bierly and Abigail Smith, “Making the Leap: How to Take the Promise of Career Connected Learning to Scale” 2019, Bain and Company, Inc., <https://www.bain.com/insights/making-the-leap-how-to-take-the-promise-of-career-connected-learning-to-scale/>

⁶ Career Connect Washington, “An Introduction,” 2019, <https://careerconnectwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CCWA-fact-sheet.January-9.pdf>

⁷ Chris Bierly and Abigail Smith, “Making the Leap: How to Take the Promise of Career Connected Learning to Scale” 2019, Bain and Company, Inc., <https://www.bain.com/insights/making-the-leap-how-to-take-the-promise-of-career-connected-learning-to-scale/>