



# INDIANA'S WORK-BASED LEARNING

## Ready to Take the Big Leap

By Rebecca Patrick

Everyone likely knows someone – perhaps even themselves – whose course in life was dramatically bettered through education. The quality work-based learning aspect can be even more profound, lifting not only individuals but an entire local community.

Students gain skills and real-world experiences while employers can use the process to foster their talent pipeline. If the latter occurs, it can impact economic development by keeping young residents employed close to home.

In the past, traditional classroom instruction and work-based learning were generally disconnected experiences rather than complementary parts of a cohesive education. All too often, students have been on their own in securing these opportunities.

But that is beginning to change in Indiana. There's an increased recognition among state leaders, educators and employers that high-quality work-based learning has an essential and even transformative role in preparing Hoosiers for success in a rapidly changing 21st century economy.

It's time to coalesce around the concept to scale quality work-based learning programs and opportunities around the state say our panelists, who took part in a January *BizVoice*® roundtable.

They are:

- Todd Hurst, executive director of the Institute for Workforce Excellence (IWE), a subsidiary of the Indiana Chamber ([www.indianachamber.com/iwe](http://www.indianachamber.com/iwe));

- Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner ([www.in.gov/doi](http://www.in.gov/doi));
- Carrie Lively, executive director at the Pursuit Institute in Hamilton County ([www.investhamiltoncounty.com/work-center-for-career-achievement](http://www.investhamiltoncounty.com/work-center-for-career-achievement));
- State Sen. Jeff Raatz (District 27), chair of the Senate Education and Career Development Committee ([iga.in.gov](http://iga.in.gov)); and
- Moriah Sowders, communications manager at Boston Scientific in Spencer ([www.bostonscientific.com](http://www.bostonscientific.com)).

The journey to get Indiana where it needs to be likely won't be quick or easy.

"We have a lot of work to do," acknowledges Raatz. "We've been talking about it for a number of years. We have a big constituency with 65,000 teachers and 290-plus school districts to actually turn this thing and get people to buy in."

### Where do we start?

"One thing that we're looking at from the Indiana Chamber perspective is that all the excitement we see around work-based learning also creates some confusion. There's a lot happening in that space ... but not necessarily clear definitions of the terminology of environments, the expectations," Hurst imparts.

"Part of the exciting time right now is that we're actively looking to solve those problems – to put in place the processes, the data reporting – to actually wrap our arms around some of those challenges and make a meaningful impact."

Raatz admits, "We've been wrestling with the terminology and what's a work-based learning experience. We know what they are,



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but do we regulate it or make the policy in place so rigid that it eliminates the ability for innovation at the local level? That’s part of what we’re trying to come up with.

“Shared terminologies are incredibly important. In the back of my mind, keeping it as nimble as possible so we don’t get ourselves backed into a corner but still lending itself to some kind of cohesiveness that employers and school districts can easily look to and say, ‘OK, this is what we want. This is what we want to do.’”

To the senator’s point, one of the clearest messages from this gathering was whatever actions are taken at the state level on any aspect of the work-based learning process shouldn’t be prescriptive; there needs to be room for adaptability.

Once the definition is in place, establishing the benchmarks and quality will follow.

The data will, in fact, “help us to find the quality,” Hurst envisions.

“I think the other thing that’s going to help us do that is capacity. You look across the state: We have 80,000-plus high school graduates every year, 90,000-plus postsecondary students and a few thousand adult education students. We want every single one of those students to have access to our work-based learning experiences.

“It may not be possible that every single student does a six-month experience at an employer’s facility,” he realizes. “So, how do we get high quality experiences that may not be a full in-depth learning or an apprenticeship experience for every student who wants one in Indiana? In some places, that may be like what’s happening across the state where student-run businesses are a very viable option and

maybe micro internships or virtual internships. We need the data I think to wrap our arms around that more.”

**Educating educators**

Jenner and Lively carry a full array of experience in the education realm – as teachers, administrators and state agency officials. The former was also an Ivy Tech Community College executive engaged in K-12 initiatives and statewide partnerships. Lively adds school counselor to her qualifications and right before her current role, she spent four years as the director of apprenticeships and work-based learning at the Indiana Department of Workforce Development.

When one of them says the following, it carries weight.

“Educators don’t understand their role in workforce development,” Lively announces. “They understand their job as an elementary teacher or an English teacher and what their goals are within those parameters. But if a parent asks, ‘What is your goal for your student?’ I would say it’s to be a productive member of society.

“Parents would probably check the box; they probably wouldn’t push. But I couldn’t tell you what I was doing in the classroom was going to impact that student and their livelihood or their job placement,” she relays.

While in general agreement, Jenner interjects there are notable exceptions across the state where educators “get it.”

The trouble is there aren’t enough of them.

And that deficiency goes all the way back to the standard college coursework and preparation to become a teacher that’s been universally accepted across the country, cite several panelists.

Lively punctuates her prior thought: “There’s a big gap. Educators don’t understand workforce development, and they don’t understand that their job is to get these kids into the workforce.”

Their lack of knowledge and that of students (and parents) can have such a detrimental domino effect, she continues.

“We have a whole pool of high school kids who think they want to be accountants who have never taken an accounting class in high school. They get two years into college and realize they don’t want to do that (after they experience it). How do we stop that and redirect them so that we’re not getting kids two years of college, an immense amount of debt and no degree?”

**Barriers to tear down**

Whether it’s hesitancy by employers, long-held beliefs or territorial inclinations, the sentiment is that it’s time to let it go.

“What I think we’ve struggled with in the past as a state, and many states do, is we always have to be aware of the relationship between education and workforce. We really should seek shared opportunities rather than throwing stones at each other,” Jenner urges.

She also makes an important distinction about connecting all the dots – and the holdup.

“Most of our educators come into the profession wanting to do everything they can to impact that child. ... But for so long, meaning decades and decades in the country, this (set way) is how we’ve educated the child and they go from one grade to another,” Jenner describes.

“There’s a lot of opportunity as a state to really break down (traditional) barriers to allow educators to lean in more because I think they’re hungry to do that – to allow for increased high school flexibility to make those connections between content areas and between the workforce – and then open up the time during the 11th and 12th grade years.”

Jenner feels we have to seize the moment. “There’s a lot of energy within our schools and now’s the time. I’ll be working with the (Indiana) House and Senate in order to seek to clear as many barriers as we can for our schools in order to lean in and engage in this work.”

A study IWE is wrapping up with employers has illuminated how tenuous some of the arrangements are since they are inherently driven by relationships.

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oftentimes at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, those internship experiences are so relationship based between an individual at an employer's facility and an individual at a school that when one of those individuals leaves, then the entire experience can begin to fall apart," Hurst states. "That's a challenge to navigate. Who is that right person?"

Both he and Sowders share that the many options available to employers on this front – from school districts, postsecondary institutions and more – can be overwhelming to the point of inaction.

What's missing in all this, notes the group, is the intermediary piece to bring cohesion.

"That will absolutely be a conversation that the General Assembly will have," Jenner offers. "How do we set this up? Where do we put the money in order to build out this (intermediary) system? I think it's going to be a major topic and we're eager to be a part of it."

Jenner is also buoyed by a recent Indiana Department of Education endeavor.

This past summer, the state agency awarded nearly 100 schools and partners with more than \$57 million in Explore, Engage and Experience grant funding.

"The primary goals are exactly what we talked about today. It's to scale and to see partnerships in communities focusing on quality work-based learning and access to postsecondary credentials of value for these students," Jenner says.

She reports an "enormous number of applicants and partners" in K-12, higher education



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and the workforce came together for the allocated funds, which were more than doubled as a result of the overwhelming response.

That's a starting point to not only cultivate enhanced working relationships across the state, but a measurable "return on investment that we will be following throughout the year to celebrate the successes but also grow through the challenges," Jenner offers.

### Pivotal role in practice

In Hamilton County, the Pursuit Institute (formerly the Hamilton County Center for Career Achievement) is that conduit between schools and businesses.

Designated last October as an independent career and technical education (CTE) district by the state, it can offer CTE programming the same as a conventional high school.

"There's this language barrier a lot of times between what (experiential learning) means in education and what it means in industry and in the real world," Lively asserts. "By having the Pursuit Institute navigate the relationships among the (area's) six large public high schools that are looking to build out programming and opportunities – and giving students (about 80,000 of them) access to the workforce pipeline – it has exponentially increased business participation."

It's all about matching student interests and nurturing relationships, stress Jenner and Lively.

The latter marvels at how diesel mechanics – a "very kind of rural focused pathway" – is a field that now has garnered the attention of Fishers students.

"(Before) they never had the opportunity to expand or experience what diesel agriculture may look like. Kids don't know what they're missing because (often) we don't venture outside of the borders of our school districts," Lively points out.

"My mantra in Hamilton County is that your ZIP code should not define your educational experience. So, we are blurring those ZIP codes. We are blurring the lines and just kind of centralizing what kids have access to and really trying to give them authentic experiences of what it looks like to live and grow in Hamilton County.

"And then how they can figure out their path and become rooted back in Hamilton County. Whether that is directly after high school or two or four years after."

Speaking to what she would like to see happen in the near term through the Pursuit Institute, Lively remarks, "High-quality work-based learning is the goal but not to undermine the importance of internships or micro



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experiences either. Those serve a purpose as well," she affirms. "We have a lot of internships and a lot of students going out job shadowing. We want to expand those into high-quality experiences."

### Modernizing graduation

Jenner puts forth, "You're hearing from a lot of different leaders in our state right now about rethinking high school. Really what that means is how do we look at the four years we have students and just be honest with ourselves. Are we doing everything we can to set them up for the best future ahead, the best opportunity ahead?"

That honest answer is no.

Raatz, who represents constituents in Franklin, Henry, Union and Wayne counties, mulls the prospect of academically backing off some of Indiana's high school diploma requirements as a trade for on-the-job experiences but is somewhat torn by the thought.

"Say we allow students in 11th or 12th grade to (more fully) experience work-based learning. That's not an easy situation either. As a nation, as a state, we've always prepared students with college prep coursework for the most part – and (there's) those who make it and those who don't," he observes.

Jenner frames it slightly differently. "I don't know that it's backing off on academic requirements. We have to maintain rigor. However, what does that baseline look like?"

Those details are still taking shape as the Indiana General Assembly is set to examine high school diploma flexibility and what the state currently requires. Whatever form it takes, Jenner emphasizes that skill development should factor into that framework.

In the end, Raatz believes it's much better to take the action than sit still.

"Let's say we give experiential credits or X – whatever that looks like. But the rigor isn't high enough or it's too high or whatever. We've got to remain nimble in this thing to get where we need to be," he conveys. "It's continually looking under the microscope. ... There are always going to be naysayers no matter what. So (let's) go ahead!"

## Employer impressions

Sowders brings a unique perspective. Her employer is a global medical technology leader in an extremely small community.

"I'm very sensitive to rural county needs being in Owen County. There's 2,000 people who live in Spencer. We employ 1,600 people. We're having to get people from (the outside).

"For a lot of those kids, college doesn't really feel attainable. What we're trying to help these students understand is you can get your high school diploma, come work with us and we'll help you get those skills. We'll help pay for your college," she relays.

Boston Scientific's primary focus is on the college student and the co-op experience, working directly with universities in Indiana and throughout the Midwest.

"We started our program about 20 years ago and have had over 500 rotations ... we did it with the intention of it being a talent pipeline for those engineering students initially. Then it evolved into some other disciplines – HR, finance and supply chain," she shares.

When succession planning revealed a future need for machinists, it led Boston Scientific to engage with a local Owen Valley High School shop teacher. The company donated old machines to the class for training.

Sowders is pleased with the level of interest to date. "Some of our machine shop workers are going over there and mentoring the students, and then we're going to bring them in for a tour. Ideally sometimes work-based learning is in the workplace, but we can do a lot of great stuff where the employers can go to the students and that reduces some of those transportation barriers as well."

Adds Jenner, "What some rural schools have done is build student enterprises within where industry leaders serve as an advising board. So, their role is an advisor to the advanced manufacturing pathway at this set of high schools."

Indeed, more employers are getting involved and moving beyond viewing work-based learning as something they do for corporate goodwill or social responsibility to recognizing – as Sowders illustrated – that it's

fundamental to an effective talent strategy in terms of recruiting and retaining their workforce.

An exciting development in Hamilton County, Lively teases, are the "explorer sites," which are in the incubation stage.

"(It's for) employers that have identified they want to connect but can't commit to a full internship or apprenticeship or have 20 students on site. But they're willing to connect by Skyping into a business class and talking (for example). ... We're trying to engage employers where the lift can happen, at whatever level they can commit to."

She reports momentum is picking up as other businesses are jumping on board and don't want to be left out.

## Ready to go big

All believe there's a foundation built for work-based learning to be expanded exponentially across the state. The trick is how to raise the structure.

Jenner describes, "The challenge that we're in is really no state at scale has figured out how to measure skill development in an experiential learning space. That is the special sauce that we have to get to and we're going to have to not be afraid of. We're going to have to not let the perfect get in the way of the good on this. I mean, we're going to have to acknowledge the value of experiential learning."

Given that no state possesses good data, it reasons no shining model exists to help speed the process along for Indiana.

"That's something we're going to have to work together to build out as a state. A lot of states are hustling to sort through this," Jenner continues.

But Indiana's education secretary can describe how the overall model would function in basic terms.

"The way we talk through approaching it is there's an on-ramp and a process to build up this business-education relationship as well as this system within the school environment to support increased work-based learning. But it's a continuum. So, there's a continuum from both sides: the employer side as well as the education side."

All the pieces are there, Lively insists. "It's finding the pockets of what can work and scaling that. ... It's finding the right people, the right individuals to jump into the water and start it. And then it snowballs."

"We're seeing that in Hamilton County where employers are at the table. ... We're trying to get students connected with employers in Hamilton County before they leave high school. If they go on to



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postsecondary (studies), we want them to know that there's five or six employers that they've already connected with that they can come back and have an employment opportunity with. So, it's not this myth of what is work-based learning or what is an apprenticeship. It's happening at really high levels across the state."

Sowders furthers the notion that time is of the essence for employers.

"If they aren't pursuing this, they're missing a fantastic opportunity to get people who are interested and want to be in the area – because if they're getting job offers before they even graduate, you're going to miss keeping those people (here). ... We need to tell our story locally. Indiana needs to tell its story as well because there are so many rich opportunities."

Hurst senses the wave is coming. "We're on the precipice of being at that point where we have some commonality, where we have some strategies moving forward and (are) really diving into what do we mean by competency-based and skill-based learning, and how we are collecting that information and articulating it," he predicts.

"As we think about where we'll be in six months, I don't know that we'll have all of those things solved, but I'm really hopeful we'll have some direction and have a game plan at the state level for how we move forward intentionally around those kinds of elements. Really prioritizing work-based learning as not only an experience the students have, but really a key part of the educational experience for all students in Indiana."