

June 5, 2024

## MEMO

# Addressing Transportation-Related Barriers Impacting Student Access to Work-Based Learning

*Findings and Recommendations from the Illinois Education and Career Success Network Policy Committee Transportation Workgroup*

As a result of ongoing statewide efforts to develop and scale work-based learning for in-school youth, policymakers and practitioners in Illinois have engaged in conversations around barriers impacting student access to work-based learning. After multiple calls from members to explore the topic further, the Illinois Education and Career Success Network's Policy Committee decided to convene a workgroup to examine transportation-related barriers to work-based learning access more deeply.

This memo summarizes the findings from the workgroup's student engagement efforts and recommendations for addressing transportation-related barriers to work-based learning access as a follow-up to the Policy Committee's first memo, [Transportation-Related Barriers Impacting Student Access to Work-Based Learning](#) (published January 2024).

Launched in December 2022, the [Policy Committee](#) provides space for local practitioners and policy leaders to collaborate and learn from one another, elevates local practice to inform Illinois state policy, and supports local practitioners in taking advantage of policy windows. Composed of a range of education, workforce, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and state agency stakeholders spanning the P-20 pipeline, the Policy Committee offers a useful venue for these conversations.

## Considering Student Perspectives

The complexity of the barriers outlined in the previous memo created an imperative to center student feedback and a diverse range of needs. As such, the workgroup pursued student input in order to incorporate their insight into potential solutions.

The workgroup conducted a survey of more than 600 current Illinois high school students to bring their voices into this discourse. The survey was circulated through many channels, including directly to students through the Success Network's [Student Advisory Council](#) and the [Career and Technical Student Organizations Board](#), as well as through practitioners in the [Success Network](#) and the [Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network](#) (I-WIN) of Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University. The survey was open to both students who have and have not participated in work-based learning in an effort to capture attitudes and feelings towards work-based learning and better understand how they impact students' decisions.

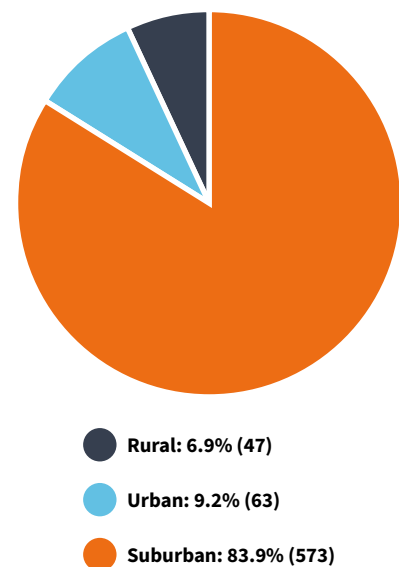
### Student Survey Results

One of the most striking observations that emerges is the breakdown of respondents by community type: 84% of respondents indicated they were from suburban communities. While this likely indicates that perspectives represented in survey responses may not fully reflect the experiences of students in rural and urban communities around the state, it does seem to suggest that suburban students are more exposed to information about work-based learning.

Similarly, when asked about transportation methods, both to get to and from school as well as outside of school hours, a majority of responses indicated they either relied on a personal vehicle or rides from family and friends. This raises equity issues for students who do not have access to a personal vehicle or reliable transportation from family or friends. One final surprising observation from the overall student responses was how infrequently students reported using public transportation in regions where it is available. Despite 92% of students indicating they have access to public transportation in their community, 76% of those students also indicated that they do not utilize this transportation option. Students cited inconvenient schedules, issues with routes, and real and perceived concerns about the safety of public transit in their community as the core reasons they do not utilize public transportation.

The workgroup also collected open-ended responses from students allowing them to elaborate on the reasoning behind their responses. Themes that emerged include cost burdens, such as the price of gas or vehicle repairs; concerns about the availability of reliable transportation or shared vehicles that align with work schedules; and uncertainty about the location of and distance to worksites. This echoed some of the barriers outlined in the workgroup's first memo released earlier this year.

*Self-Reported Community Types of Student Responders*



## District and Local Strategies

After considering the student insights and previously outlined barriers, the workgroup considered how to address these challenges in ways that enhance equitable access to work-based learning. While this issue is complex and not easily solved, communities can utilize various strategies to overcome the challenges related to transportation.

Where public transportation is available, students have reported not being able to afford fares. Some districts around the state, such as Chicago Public Schools, partner with their local transit authority to secure fare cards or vouchers that are complementary to students and either fully cover or subsidize the cost of transit. Another way districts address cost burdens for transportation is by including transportation-related costs when applying for grants and other funding where it is allowable. These funds can be used to cover public transportation fares, pay for private transportation, or purchase vehicles, for example. To the extent possible, these strategies can help minimize the cost burden placed on students, shifting it to the system.

Other districts have shifted to thinking strategically about the locations of employer partners hosting work-based learning opportunities. Some focus on recruiting employers nearer to the school so students are able to walk to their worksites. In other communities, they have encouraged partners (especially larger employers) to hire multiple students during the same period to alleviate the challenges districts face around transporting small numbers of students. To fully employ these strategies, intentional and continuing work around developing and maintaining partnerships in the community, such as with employers, local chambers of commerce, or local transit authorities, is essential.

Many districts are exploring alternative approaches to work-based learning sites. Two primary mechanisms for this have been incorporating virtual/hybrid work-based learning opportunities or establishing school-based enterprises. According to the Illinois State Board of Education's [Work-Based Learning Manual](#), a school-based enterprise is a type of career development experience that involves a simulated or actual business conducted within a school. Collinsville Area Vocational Center has been [highlighted by I-WIN](#) as a model of how school-based enterprises offer valuable experiences for students, such as working in a student-run auto repair shop. As “occurs in a workplace or under other authentic working conditions” serves as a key component of the definition of career development experiences, school districts are encouraged to maintain a broad range of work-based learning opportunities both in and outside of schools.<sup>1</sup>

## Systems-Level Solutions

Statewide, challenges around allowable vehicles and driver credentials pose systemic challenges. Where possible, agencies should consider ways to help subsidize transportation with more flexible funding, including naming it as an allowable expense in funding notices. Incorporating transportation as a potential use of funds will offer districts space to innovate as they grapple with some of these more rigid barriers.

Additionally, there is a need for broader exploration amongst state agencies and policymakers to find new ways the state can incentivize employers to partner with high school districts seeking to offer work-based learning. One way to encourage employer participation could be by offering tax incentives or grants to businesses that partner with districts. State agencies can also incorporate more details about employers who are serving as exemplars in lists or databases. Connecting districts with

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1 The quote is taken from the career development experience definition in the [Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary](#), which was developed and refined by a committee of representatives from key state agencies and committees pertaining to the state's broader education and workforce systems.

information about how many students employers can host and in which pathways can pave the way towards developing new partnerships, which are key in many strategies for addressing transportation challenges. The development of a statewide model for partnerships between employers and districts, similar to the Model Partnership Agreement for dual credit, guided by principles in the [Career Development Experience Toolkit](#), would complement these efforts by streamlining the process of establishing partnerships.

At a systems level, remaining open-minded and creative can often open the door to innovative solutions. In an effort to consider all possible solutions and strategies to address the barriers facing students, the workgroup explored potential solutions that may not always be immediately possible to implement. For example, districts may wish to explore rideshare vouchers for students. Organizations such as HopSkipDrive are working to adapt the rideshare model to work for student transportation within the parameters of state requirements around student safety.

Additionally, state policymakers, district leaders, and employers should examine their policies around traditional schedules for work-based learning. In some cases, offering more flexibility has the potential to minimize scheduling challenges that limit a student's access to reliable transportation, district-provided or otherwise.

## Resources

As regions and school districts grapple with these challenges, the transportation workgroup has gathered some resources that can offer insight into best practices.

- I-WIN engages practitioners and policymakers in peer-to-peer learning through [network convenings and resources](#). The hub also includes a [framework for virtual work-based learning](#).
- More broadly, the [Career Development Experience Toolkit](#) from Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University outlines many considerations for those developing and offering Career Development Experiences as a part of College and Career Pathway Endorsement implementation.

## Moving Forward

The workgroup hopes this memo shines a light on important considerations and strategies that districts and communities across the state will hold in mind as they work to expand access to work-based learning. The memo will be shared extensively among state policymakers and stakeholders, including the Illinois State Board of Education, the P-20 Council, I-WIN, Success Network, and Illinois Workforce Innovation Board. While the work of this group has concluded, the Success Network's efforts aim to scaffold the work of other statewide organizations and committees, particularly the Illinois Workforce and Innovation Board's Career Pathways for Target Populations Committee as they explore how transportation-related barriers impact out-of-school youth.