

January 10, 2024

## MEMO

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

*Initial Findings from the Success Network Policy Committee*

Over the past decade, work-based learning has been a critical strategy in the state's broader efforts to expand college and career pathways. For in-school youth, this is a fundamental component of the College and Career Pathway Endorsement (CCPE) system established in the 2016 Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act<sup>1</sup>. The CCPE has also been incorporated into the Every Student Succeeds Act Plan and Perkins V Plan such that they also advance implementation of work-based learning for students statewide. Further, the 2022 passage of HB3296 ([Public Act 102-0917](#)) calls for districts to scale their offerings of the endorsements, thus functioning as an additional policy push to provide increased access to work-based learning. Coupled with the momentum generated by these policy levers, bodies such as the Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network<sup>2</sup> also foster efforts to scale work-based learning as a key career awareness and preparation activity.

As a result of these ongoing efforts to develop and scale work-based learning for in-school youth, policymakers and practitioners have engaged in conversations around barriers impacting student access to work-based learning. While there are many barriers to scaling and ensuring student access to work-based learning, practitioners highlighted one critical barrier: transportation for in-school youth to access their

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.

work-based learning experiences. After multiple calls from Illinois Education and Career Success Network Policy Committee members to explore the topic further, we decided to convene a workgroup to examine these transportation-related barriers to work-based learning access more deeply.

The Policy Committee's work-based learning transportation workgroup met several times to surface and consider how access to transportation impacts work-based learning access for in-school youth, including consideration of both local and statewide systemic challenges. This memo summarizes our initial findings about the core transportation-related barriers to work-based learning access. As our discussions continue, we will explore potential solutions to these challenges.

## District and Local Challenges

The workgroup's discussions surfaced two core themes around transportation: access and cost, which shape both public and private transportation options.

### Public Transportation

Public transportation availability varies considerably based on region type. For students in more suburban or rural settings, there is typically very little, if any, public transportation in their communities or near employer partners, who may be more geographically spread out. While public transportation is more widespread in urban settings, many low-income communities and communities of color still find themselves without access to reliable public transportation. In both cases, this results in a need for districts or students themselves to provide transportation to commute to and from work-based learning opportunities.

Further, even where public transportation may be available, fares and unsuitable routes or schedules can mean it is not a viable option for students to reach their work-based learning worksites. Many students may be unable to afford fares, especially if no student fare option exists or when traveling outside of student reduced fare hours. Paying for fares may be particularly challenging for students regularly relying on public transportation to reach the minimum number of hours for a career development experience (60 hours) under the PWR Act's College and Career Pathway Endorsement system. Limited public transportation options or routes requiring one or more transit transfers can make the logistics of participating in work-based learning experiences challenging or unduly time-consuming for students. Unfortunately, employer partners may not always be able to support alternative schedules that better align with school hours and public transportation availability.

### Private Transportation

Students must rely either on district-provided or private transportation where public transportation is unavailable. In the case of personal transportation, students without access to a family vehicle may not be able to participate in work-based learning opportunities. Further, even when a private vehicle may be available, the fuel cost (particularly where work-based learning is for school credit and not monetary wages) may outweigh the actual or perceived benefit of participating in work-based learning. Burdening students and their families with the transportation logistics of participating in work-based learning may dissuade them from engaging in valuable hands-on learning opportunities.

## Systemic Challenges

The workgroup surfaced additional barriers grounded in state policy. In this category, the core challenges pertain to limitations on vehicle type, driver credentials, and available resources. For instance, current state policy restricts the types of vehicles allowed to transport students across K-12 grades, which vary depending on the number of students being transported and whether or not the

vehicle is being used for curricular purposes. When transporting students to work-based learning sites, the number of students in the vehicle is regularly less than ten at a given time. While districts can use a traditional yellow school bus for these groups, it is not typically the most practical option given the relatively small number of students and high cost. Instead, many turn to other, smaller vehicles. Per state policy, these other vehicles must have certification labels indicating if they are a multi-purpose passenger vehicle or multi-passenger vehicle as designated by the manufacturer. Consequently, the best option is typically a 10-passenger van. For some districts, especially smaller ones, securing these vehicles can be expensive and exacerbated by supply chain issues impacting vehicle availability.

Driver credential requirements also limit the pool of available drivers. When used for curricular purposes, all the previously mentioned vehicles require a school bus driver permit, at minimum. Another type of vehicle that is permissible for transporting 11–15 students, grades 9–12, is a multi-function school activity bus. Many districts have these buses but do not have enough drivers with the appropriate permits to use them for curricular purposes. Obtaining the necessary credentials can be time-consuming, require training that has limited availability, and increase the workload of staff members who may also be responsible for teaching or other roles in their schools. The ongoing teacher shortage has further expanded this barrier, as vacant positions remain open for longer periods of time.

For many across the state, funding for transportation can be one of the biggest obstacles to overcome. Districts are already grappling with limited funding, and identifying usable funds for work-based learning transportation can be challenging. For example, districts cannot use Career and Technical Education Perkins funds for transportation-related expenses, including the purchase of vehicles. While some schools attempt to use Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding to cover transportation costs, the process can be cumbersome and confusing, potentially deterring their use. As districts work to balance and prioritize expenditures, finding ways to unlock funds that can address transportation barriers for work-based learning will be critical.

## Equity Considerations

As the state becomes increasingly diverse, the Success Network is committed to advancing equity-centered work, including considering the equity implications of these transportation barriers and any potential solutions. These implications include the impact of asking students to provide their own transportation to work-based learning sites, particularly in communities with low-income students. We must also consider how students are compensated for their work-based learning experiences. While many students receive academic credit for participating in work-based learning, it is still important to consider the role of wages. Not only can a lack of appropriate pay discourage students from engaging in work-based learning, but it may also further impede their ability to cover public or private transportation costs. The workgroup believes minimizing the cost burden on students is essential as solutions are developed.

Even where districts explore creative work-based learning offerings to circumvent transportation barriers, such as school-based enterprises or virtual experiences, it is crucial to consider how these forms of work-based learning do or do not meet the diverse needs of students. While school-based and virtual options are creative and can address the needs of some students, ideally, districts will be supported to provide access to a broad range of work-based learning opportunities for their students in other real work environments. It is important to remember that accounting for the diverse needs of students is nuanced, and complex problems require complex solutions.

## Future Plans

Now that the workgroup has surfaced a wide array of transportation-related challenges, we are focusing on understanding and identifying creative solutions and resources to address these barriers. In that work, we aim to elevate ideas for communities to learn from and for the Network and partners to advance through policy work. Further, our efforts will scaffold the work of other statewide organizations and committees, particularly the Illinois Workforce and Innovation Board's Career Pathways for Target Populations Committee. The workgroup also plans to engage students in this discourse through a survey and empathy interviews to gain insight into their experiences getting to and from work-based learning to incorporate into any potential recommendations the group may offer. Ultimately, this additional work will culminate in a second update summarizing the findings, to be released in 2024.

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- 1 The [PWR Act](#) establishes a voluntary system for school districts to award College and Career Pathways Endorsements on high school diplomas. The endorsement simultaneously demonstrates students' readiness for postsecondary programs and entry-level professional learning experiences in a selected career interest area. The endorsement also incentivizes career exploration and acceleration, particularly in high-demand career fields.
  - 2 Education Systems Center at NIU launched the [Illinois Work-Based Learning Innovation Network \(I-WIN\)](#) in 2020 to engage practitioners and policymakers in conversations, offers guidance, and shares resources to support work-based learning models embedded in both the College and Career Pathway Endorsements and overall state pathways strategies.