



# Reducing Barriers to Work-Based Learning Opportunities

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## Introduction

Oklahoma's businesses and economy need career-ready workers. This starts in the classroom. Last year, high school graduation requirements were changed to allow more types of classes to count toward degree completion. These reforms created "pathway units" that provide high school students time in their class schedules for career exposure and exploration. However, this is only the first step in ensuring that Oklahoma students are prepared to enter the workforce.

These 'pathway units' are primed for experiential learning. Experiential learning takes a concept and helps the student see it in action. This real-world connection [increases the likelihood of mastery](#). Students will also be able to discern whether they enjoy that career field, focusing their time on an educational pathway.

Oklahoma's [Individualized Career Academic Plan \(ICAP\)](#) promises to expose students to career awareness, knowledge, and skills for their post-secondary path. There are three stages a student participates in experiential learning: "learning about work, learning through work, and learning for work" ([Engage OK Session Information Brief](#)).

Learning about work can happen beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school. Learning through work occurs in middle and high school. Learning for work can occur in high school through Career and Technical Education and other post-secondary opportunities.

## Problem

[The American Student Assistant Survey](#) reports that 37% of internships and work-based learning opportunities available are offered to high school students in 2023. Businesses that participate are required to comply with [heightened safety laws](#) and liability coverage, which may contribute to the low number of internships available. Businesses typically hold both workers' compensation and general liability insurance, but the question becomes when these policies cover the student at the worksite.

Making sure businesses have the appropriate liability coverage so that more students have access to work-based learning settings is one step toward improving workforce development.

## Solution

States are taking various approaches to ensuring that schools and business understand their liability in the work-based learning environment.

In Georgia, employers of a work-based learning student, whether paid or unpaid, must carry workers' compensation for the student, at a discounted premium rate.

[GA Code § 34-9-431 \(2023\)](#). Nebraska takes a [different approach](#). If the student is unpaid, no worker's compensation coverage is required by either the school district or the business, rather the student is covered by the general liability insurance.

Oklahoma's worker's compensation coverage should be clarified to ensure businesses understand when their coverage needs to cover a work-based learning student. Currently, the definition of employee includes apprenticeship but does not speak to the other types of work-based learning students. [85A O.S. § 2 \(OSCN 2024\)](#). Clarifying when a student is participating in an unpaid work-based learning program that the workers' compensation coverage is unnecessary. This will ensure that employers understand what coverage the student falls under, and in turn, encourages more work-based learning opportunities for students and employers across the state.

