



Breaking the Bottleneck:

Scaling Work-based Learning for Every Colorado High Schooler

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Introduction:

Unblocking The Supply Constraint

Nearly 70% of high school students say they want work-based learning.ⁱ Many employers say they want to provide it. Policymakers have put forward bold ambitions for making work-based learning (WBL) widely available. And yet only a small share of teens completes a work-based learning opportunity over the course of their high school experience.ⁱⁱ Many students are uncertain about what path to pursue, report limited confidence in navigating career decisions, and continue to concentrate their aspirations around a narrow set of traditional professional careers—most commonly through a four-year college pathway.^{iii,iv}

The pressure on that system is building from two directions at once. AI tools are eroding the entry-level roles that have historically served as on-ramps to professional careers, making early structured work experiences more valuable precisely as they become harder to find.^v The clearest preview of where this is headed comes from higher education, where WBL systems are more mature. In 2023, 8.2 million college students sought internships; only 3.6 million participated.^{vi} Applications per available role have more than doubled in three years. 41% of the class of 2025 applied to at least one internship, up from 34% in 2023.^{vii} The college WBL system is not growing fast enough to meet demand. High school students now face this same dynamic – and at a sharper degree of mismatch.

The experience of the college internship market clarifies the nature of the constraint. Despite well-documented benefits for both students and employers, internship participation has not scaled in proportion to student demand. The limiting factor is not student interest but employer supply: the willingness and capacity of organizations to create, structure, and sustain these opportunities. For high school work-based learning, where the perceived costs are higher and the immediate returns less clear, this supply constraint is likely to be even more binding.

In fact, many employers are already at capacity, and the expansion of opportunities for high school students will rely on largely the same set of employers already consumed by college-focused efforts. This will create significant pressure on the system that will need to be mitigated.

Expanding work-based learning for high school students introduces additional constraints that go beyond those observed in college markets. Scheduling is a structural barrier: high school students are in class during most of the workday, limiting their availability for traditional workplace participation. Employer value perception is another: organizations that already question the near-term productivity of college interns are even less likely to view younger, less experienced high school students as contributors. Finally, student preparedness differs meaningfully. Outside of Career & Technical Education programs, high school curricula are often less applied, leaving students with fewer immediately deployable skills and requiring greater upfront investment from employers to structure meaningful experiences. Together, these factors compound the core supply challenge, making expansion not simply a matter of extending existing models downward, but rather of redesigning them to fit a different set of constraints.

Colorado's experience highlights the gap between ambition and capacity. The state has invested more seriously in WBL than almost any other: youth apprenticeship through CareerWise, P-TECH schools, dual enrollment expansion, and a decade of cross-sector policy work have established Colorado as a national model. Now the Colorado Department of Education has set the most ambitious WBL target in the country. By 2029, every high school graduate is meant to complete at least one of three workforce readiness milestones – what the state calls the **Big Three**: an in-demand industry credential, 12 college credits, or a high-quality work-based learning experience.

Our analysis of the WBL landscape in Colorado both validates the benefits of WBL and reveals a structural gap: Demand for these experiences already exceeds supply. The current WBL system cannot deliver at scale, and expansion will not happen organically. But the answer is not a single model or a single intervention. Making WBL broadly available to high school students will require a portfolio strategy: expanding existing models where the gaps are greatest, increasing the value employers derive from participation, developing new models that work around the logistical constraints of placing high school students in workplaces, and recognizing the learning potential of work students are already doing.

Colorado's Big Three Goal

Colorado has identified three core pathways: 1) a quality, in-demand industry credential, 2) 12 college credits on a defined postsecondary pathway, 3) a high-quality work-based learning (WBL) experience. Its goal is that every student should have access to all three pathways and should complete at least one of them.

The scale of this aspiration exposes a structural constraint. With more than 60,000 students graduating annually, the number of available WBL opportunities falls far short of what universal access would require.^{viii}

Figure One. The Scale Challenge Facing High School Work-Based Learning



On average, Colorado's internship market provided just one high school-accessible posting for every 27 graduates between 2018 and 2024. In practical terms, that meant more than 96% of Colorado high school students moved through their secondary education without access to an internship via publicly posted opportunities. The challenge facing Colorado is therefore not one of modest expansion. Reaching the scale envisioned by the Big Three goal will require a fundamentally broader approach: expanding existing models into sectors, occupations, and regions the current system has bypassed; making participation more valuable to employers so existing programs have reason to grow; creating lower-lift models that reduce the logistical burden of placing students in workplaces; making the internship opportunities that exist accessible to students without personal connections; and building educational structures that help students connect the work they already do to what they are learning in school.

Colorado therefore functions as an invaluable stress test for the field. It brings together key assets – policy alignment, employer engagement infrastructure, and a clear, measurable target – while still struggling with the same demand-side constraints that plague every state.

This report analyzes what it will actually take to close that gap. We draw on a database of hundreds of millions of job postings, the Institute's database of the career histories of more than 65 million American workers, as well as insights from focus groups our researchers undertook with Colorado employers. The analysis quantifies what WBL delivers for students and employers, assesses where Colorado's current system succeeds and where it runs out of road, and identifies four paths to scale. Some require expanding existing models into underserved sectors and geographies. Some require making internships more valuable to employers by aligning student work more closely with entry-level roles and strengthening pathways from internship to employment. Some require new models that reduce employer lift and work around the realities of the high school schedule. And some require a more radical shift: treating the jobs students already hold as a source of learning that schools can help students name, interpret, and build on. The analysis focuses on internships as the most consistently observable WBL model in labor market data, with employer focus groups filling in what the data cannot see.

Colorado has set the most ambitious WBL target in the country. What follows is an honest account of what it will take for the state to achieve its ambitions.

Section I: What Work-Based Learning Delivers For Students

The most robust outcome data on WBL come from higher education. College students have participated in internships and apprenticeships for decades, producing a research base that newer high school programs cannot yet match. Because college-aged internships represent the majority of identifiable WBL experiences in our data, most evidence on the effectiveness of these programs is based on the experiences of college students. But the analysis is not limited to college students, and the evidence remains strongly suggestive of what is at stake for high schoolers: the mechanisms that make WBL work don't just activate after a student turns 18.

The wage premium is real and persistent. BGI's analysis of Colorado workers finds that those who completed an internship earn 7 to 14% more in their first year than comparable workers who did not. For bachelor's-level workers, that premium persists over time, with those who had an internship during college still earning 11.5% more than their classmates five years after graduation. Workers who intern are also more likely to be promoted within five years, an advantage that grows when the internship and first full-time job are with the same employer.

This pattern holds across both degree and non-degree roles. For example, in roles that do not require a bachelor's degree, such as search marketing or computer network support, roughly one in three workers with internship experience is promoted within five years, compared to one in five without.

WBL inoculates against underemployment. In the 2024 report, "Talent Disrupted", researchers from the Burning Glass Institute and Strada found that 54% of those who had not completed an internship wound up graduating into a job they didn't need college to get vs. 41% of those who had internship experience – a 13-percentage-point gap – highlighting the role and value of internships in readying students for careers.^x

The equity case is not what most people assume. WBL is often framed as a benefit that flows to already-advantaged students. The data invert this. Internships are associated with roughly a 17-percentage-point reduction in underemployment for Black graduates at selective institutions. The gains for Hispanic and Asian graduates are similarly large, and in many cases larger than the effects observed for white graduates. The students with the least access to WBL are the ones who stand to gain the most from it.

This finding sharpens the imperative. It confirms that WBL is one of the most powerful tools available for reducing structural inequality in career outcomes. But it also raises the stakes of limited access: when opportunities remain scarce, they are disproportionately captured by those with existing advantages, amplifying—rather than reducing—inequality.

An imperative for high schoolers as well. While more limited, the high school evidence points in the same direction. MDRC's gold-standard randomized controlled trial of Career Academies, high school programs that embed employer partnerships and WBL into the curriculum, found earnings gains of 11% overall and 17% for young men, sustained across eight years of follow-up.^x Researchers linked these gains to the Academies' integration of career-themed instruction, employer engagement, and work-based learning experiences.

Yet in Colorado today, these benefits accrue largely to college students. As more students consider non-degree pathways, early work experience plays a growing role in shaping both education and career outcomes – beyond just wages or immediate placement.^{xi}

Colorado's Leadership in Apprenticeships

Colorado is widely recognized as a national leader in youth apprenticeships. Drawing in part on the Swiss model, the state has built a robust ecosystem through sustained policy support, employer incentives, and cross-sector collaboration. Over the past decade, the number of active apprentices has nearly doubled to roughly 10,000.

Key milestones include the launch of P-TECH schools in 2015, the creation of the Business Experiential-Learning Commission and CareerWise in 2016, and policies that allow flexibility for out-of-school learning. While apprenticeships remain concentrated in construction trades, Colorado has expanded into sectors such as healthcare and education, demonstrating that the model can extend beyond its traditional base.

This infrastructure matters, but it does not solve the scale problem. Even with sustained growth, apprenticeships operate at a scale far below what Colorado's Big Three goal requires. The same design considerations that make apprenticeships high-quality, high-intensity experiences also limit how quickly they can expand. Apprenticeships will remain an important part of the system, particularly for students seeking deeper, longer-term engagement. But reaching all students will require a broader set of models that can operate at much larger scale.

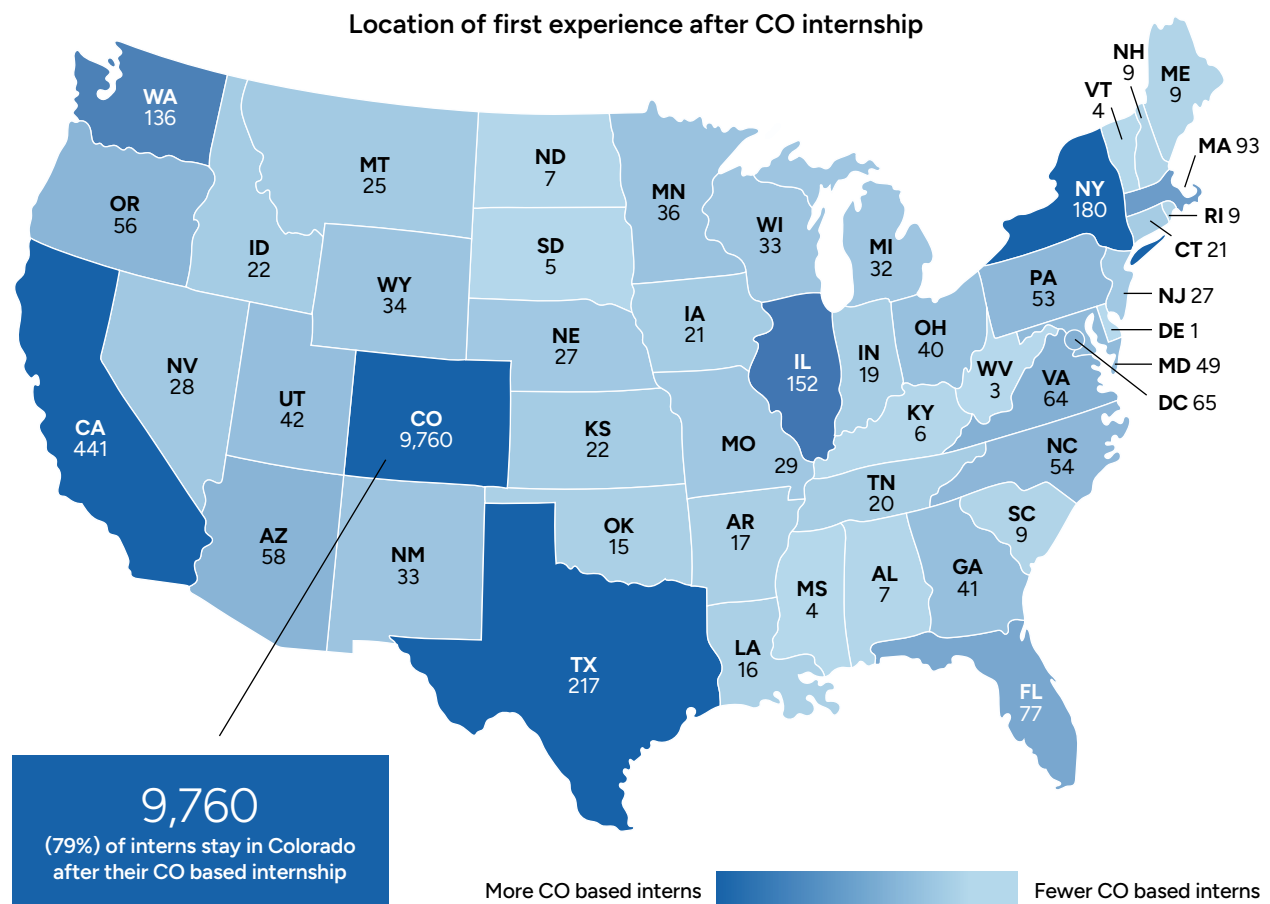
Source: [Colorado Department of Labor and Employment Apprenticeship Data Dashboard](#); *Colorado Education Initiative & Colorado Succeeds, Pathways to College and Career: Advancing Colorado's Homegrown Talent Coalition to Lead and Sustain Complex Change (2025)*; *CareerWise Colorado*.

Section II: What Employers Get Out Of It

Work-based learning persists because it creates value for employers as well as students. Internships and other WBL models help firms recruit talent, reduce hiring uncertainty, build stronger retention pipelines, and expose students to industries facing long-term workforce shortages. At the same time, employers do bear real costs in offering internship programs. Programs require supervision, coordination, and staff time, and many employers are reluctant to expand opportunities unless the value proposition is clear. Understanding what employers gain from WBL is critical to designing systems that can scale beyond a relatively small set of large employers.

For starters, internships anchor talent locally. 9,760 (79%) of interns stay in CO after their CO based internship.^{xii}

Figure Two. Internships Anchor Talent in State



Source: BGI Analysis of Burning Glass Institute Career Histories Database in Colorado, 2018-2024

Colorado employers use internships primarily for three purposes: recruiting talent, exposing students to their industry, and generating value from the work interns perform. The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) finds the same pattern nationally, with attracting early-career talent the primary driver for employer participation.^{xiii}

The value to employers is direct and measurable: among top Colorado employers, up to 40% of interns convert to full-time roles, more than double the state average. At the college level, Deloitte and EY convert roughly 66% of their interns to full-time hires. KPMG converts 51%, and Lockheed Martin converts 46%. Those converted workers are 8.5–13% more likely to remain with their employer for three or more years, even after controlling for employer-level differences. That translates directly to lower turnover costs and more stable teams. In a labor market where turnover costs are estimated to range from 50 to 200% of annual salary, that improvement is material.^{xiv}

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In today's uncertain labor market, employers have identified an important friction point. They are reluctant to expand internship programs if they cannot offer a credible path to full-time employment. At the same time, employers report that they find the work that interns perform to be of limited value – or to require more effort from managers than the output is worth. Put together, these point to a critical constraint and an important design consideration for any initiative designed to expand WBL availability. As long as WBL's value is perceived to lie only in conversion, any efforts at scaling access will be capped by the level of hiring for permanent positions. For Colorado to succeed, it will need to decouple the commercial logic from conversion itself.

Colorado employers articulated three distinct types of value from WBL. Designing programs that scale requires aligning with at least one of these value propositions—and, where possible, reinforcing them through program design:

- **Conversion value:** The intern becomes a full-time hire who already knows the organization, has demonstrated actual performance, and requires less onboarding. This is the talent pipeline case. *Programs that emphasize conversion value can increase employer participation by aligning timing and structure with hiring cycles, defining clear pathways from WBL into entry-level roles, and prioritizing occupations where employers anticipate sustained hiring demand.*
- **Production value:** The intern delivers real work during the engagement—research, analysis, project execution. They help get the job done in the same way that employers may otherwise turn to contingent labor solutions. *This value can be strengthened by designing experiences around discrete, scoped projects; pooling students across teams or cohorts to reduce supervision burden; and aligning placements to roles where work can be modularized and contribute quickly.*

- **Exposure value:** The organization builds relationships with the next generation of workers, strengthens its brand as an employer of choice, and deepens community ties. This is a longer-term case and the hardest to quantify. *Lower-lift models—such as job shadows, project-based experiences, and employer classroom engagement—can make this value proposition viable for smaller firms, particularly when supported by intermediaries that reduce coordination costs and make participation repeatable.*

One constraint deserves direct acknowledgment. Large employers, which currently generate more than half of Colorado’s intern placements despite employing only 20% of the workforce, tend to calibrate internship volume to anticipated entry-level hiring. When hiring slows, programs shrink. BGI’s focus group conversations with talent leaders from many of the state’s largest employers confirmed this directly: large employers are at capacity, and the expansion opportunity lies with small and mid-sized firms, sectors where WBL penetration is low relative to labor demand. Activating these firms will require program models designed to reduce the cost and complexity of participation.

Innovation Underway: Industry-Led Pathways into Construction

Founded in 2015, Careers in Construction Colorado (CICC) illustrates a distinctive approach to organizing work-based learning at scale. Rather than relying on individual schools to build employer relationships, CICC operates through a network of regional chapters—trade associations and employer groups—that coordinate industry engagement across schools. This structure allows employers to participate without each company building a program from scratch. The program includes guest speakers, job shadows, site visits, and job placement, and is anchored in a standardized, industry-recognized curriculum and supported by state incentives tied to credential attainment. CICC has grown quickly, reaching more than 20,000 students across 90+ high schools. In 2024–25, over 4,600 students participated, earning approximately 3,000 pre-apprenticeship certificates and 1,600 OSHA credentials.

Source: [Careers in Construction](#)

Section III: Colorado's WBL Market Is Defined By College Opportunity

Colorado's internship market is extensive, but it almost entirely excludes high school students. From 2018 to 2024, BGI tracked 99,850 internship postings in Colorado. The market contracted 21% in 2020, rebounded 47% in 2021, and has leveled off slightly above its pre-pandemic baseline, with recent signs of softening as entry-level hiring slows.^{xv}

The distribution reveals a system serving a narrow population. CU Boulder and Colorado State supply approximately 40% of the state's interns. Large employers generate more than half of all placements. Ten of the top 15 internship-associated occupations in Colorado typically require a bachelor's degree. The most common intern majors are Engineering (25%), Business (22%), Computer Science (8%), and Communications (7%).

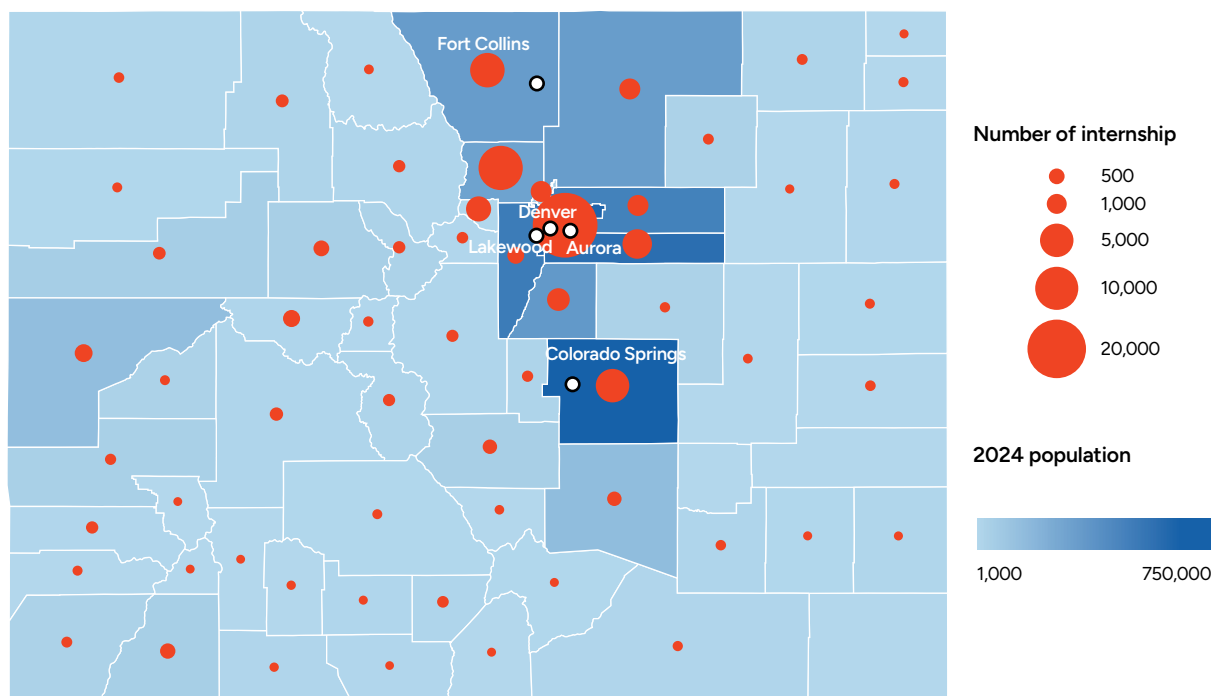
Table One. Internships by Occupation and Education Level

Occupation	No. of Internships	Typical Ed Requirement
Marketing Specialists	8,715	Bachelor's degree
Software Developers	6,314	Bachelor's degree
Legal Assistants	6,081	Associate's degree
Social Science Research Assistants	4,548	Bachelor's degree
Mechanical Engineering Techs	4,260	Associate's degree
Marketing Managers	3,232	Bachelor's degree
Accountants and Auditors	3,067	Bachelor's degree
Judicial Law Clerks	2,572	Professional Degree
Media and Communication Workers	2,393	High school diploma
Financial and Investment Analysts	2,364	Bachelor's degree
Public Relations Specialists	2,284	Bachelor's degree
Civil Engineering Techs	2,225	Associate's degree
Office and Admin Support Workers	1,890	High school diploma
Project Management Specialists	1,837	Bachelor's degree
Graphic Designers	1,681	Bachelor's degree

Source: BGI Analysis of Burning Glass Institute Career Histories Database in Colorado, 2010 – present; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). [Education and training assignments by detailed occupation](#).

The demographic composition of Colorado's intern pool has shifted but does not yet come close to mirroring the state's population. The nonwhite share of interns rose from 16% in 2016 to nearly 22% in 2024, and the representation of women has ticked up modestly. The sharpest gap is for Hispanic students. Colorado's Hispanic student population has grown rapidly relative to the overall student population—rising from 33.6% in 2018

Figure Three. Where You Live Shapes Access to Internships



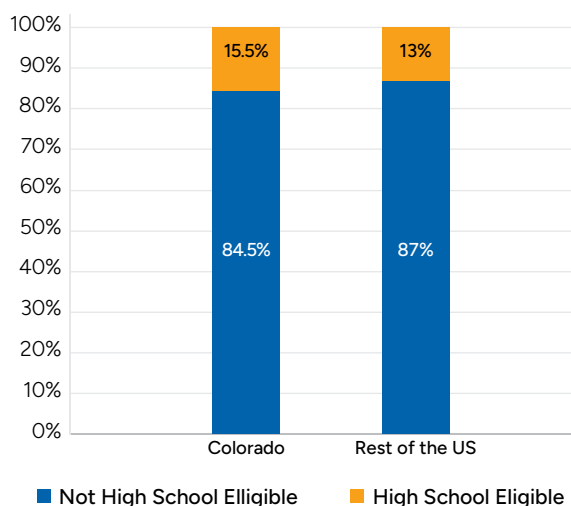
Source: BGI Analysis of Burning Glass Institute Career Histories Database in Colorado, 2018–2024

to 36.5% in 2024, even as the state’s total student population declined by 3.3%—but that growth has not translated into proportional internship access.^{xvi} In 2024, only 7% of Colorado’s interns were Hispanic.

The geographic concentration compounds the access problem. Internships cluster in the urban core: Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs, Fort Collins. Rural counties are losing young adults to out-migration while simultaneously offering the fewest WBL opportunities: only 11% of WBL opportunities exist outside major metro areas.^{xvii} A system built to place engineering and business undergraduates into white-collar firms in Denver and Fort Collins is not a system that reaches a 16-year-old in Pueblo or Grand Junction.

Figure Four. Most Internship Opportunities Are Not Designed for High School Students

Share of high school eligible internship postings

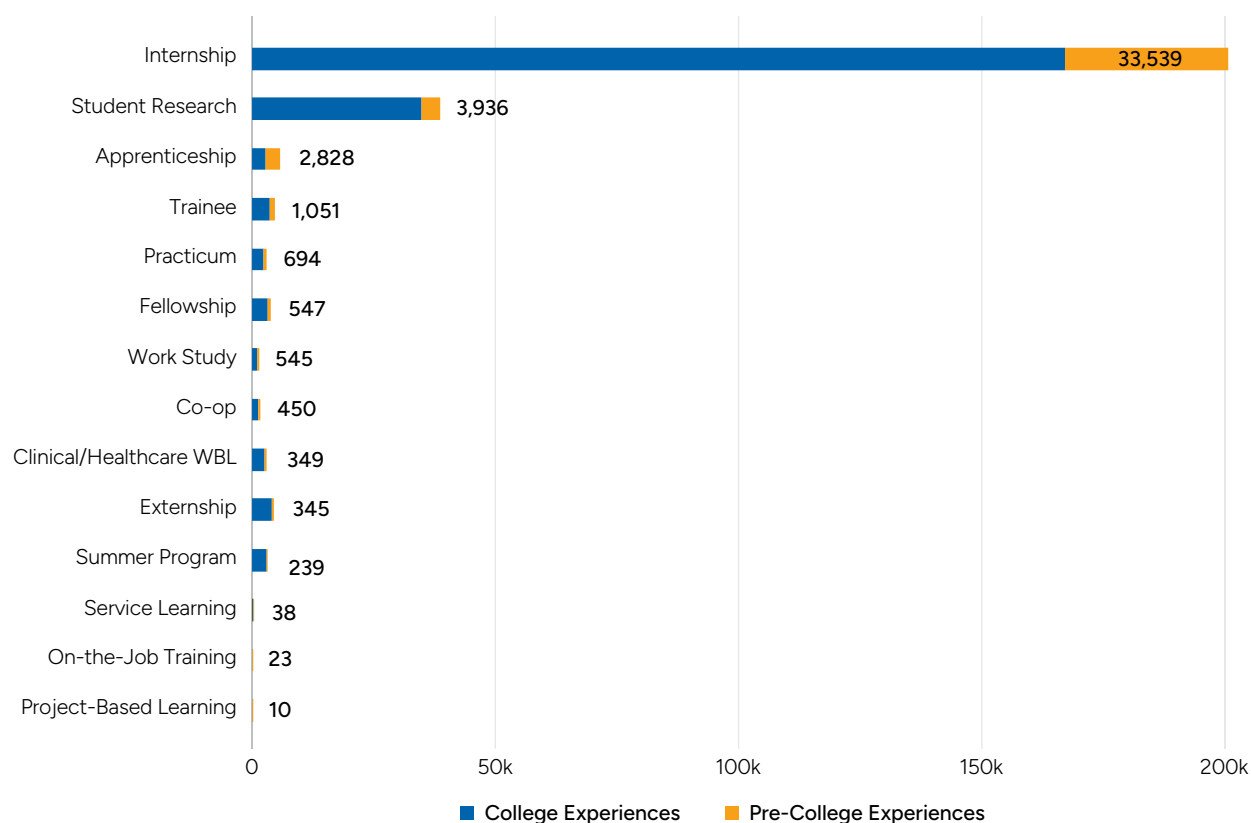


Source: BGI analysis of Lightcast job postings data (August 2023 – July 2024)

For all its scale, Colorado’s internship market barely reaches high school students. While 15.5% of internship postings are technically accessible to high school-aged workers, that share translates into remarkably limited access at population scale. Between 2018 and 2024, Colorado produced roughly 414,000 high school graduates, while just 15,500 internship postings statewide were open to them—roughly one posting for every 27 graduates—an effect driven by the compounding of how few HS-accessible internship opportunities there are, how rarely these internships are posted online, and the fact that there aren’t even enough WBL opportunities to go around for all *college* students. Even if every HS-accessible posting had been filled by a Colorado student, the system would still fall hundreds of thousands of opportunities short of the scale the Big Three goal would require.

Apprenticeships and other WBL models exist alongside internships but at far smaller documented scale. The data on these alternative models are less robust, not only because the activity is sparser but also because measurement systems have not caught up with practice.

Figure Five. Work-Based Learning Data Are Overwhelmingly Internship-Driven



Source: BGI Analysis of Burning Glass Institute Career Histories Database in Colorado, 2010-present

Section IV: Four Paths to Scale

Closing the gap between 15,500 WBL opportunities accessible to high schoolers and the 60,000 needed requires work on several fronts simultaneously. The first is targeted expansion of existing models. The second involves spurring natural growth in existing programs by enhancing the value accrued to employers. The third advances new models that scale availability by removing logistical constraints associated with placing students in the workplace. The fourth gets to radical scale by seeking volume where it already is, rethinking what it means to participate in WBL and how to make the work students are already undertaking of greater relevance to their studies.

Path One: Expand Where the Gaps Are Greatest

Significant capacity can be added by extending existing WBL models into sectors and geographies the current system has bypassed. Three targets stand out:

High-demand occupations with low WBL penetration. In Colorado, several high-demand occupations—including healthcare administration, construction management, food service management, automotive technology, and the skilled trades—generate thousands of annual job openings open to workers with only a high school diploma while supporting little to no internship pipeline. Across eleven major occupations identified in this analysis, internship-to-posting rates range from just 2.5 to 4.9 percent, far below the levels seen in fields with established work-based learning systems.

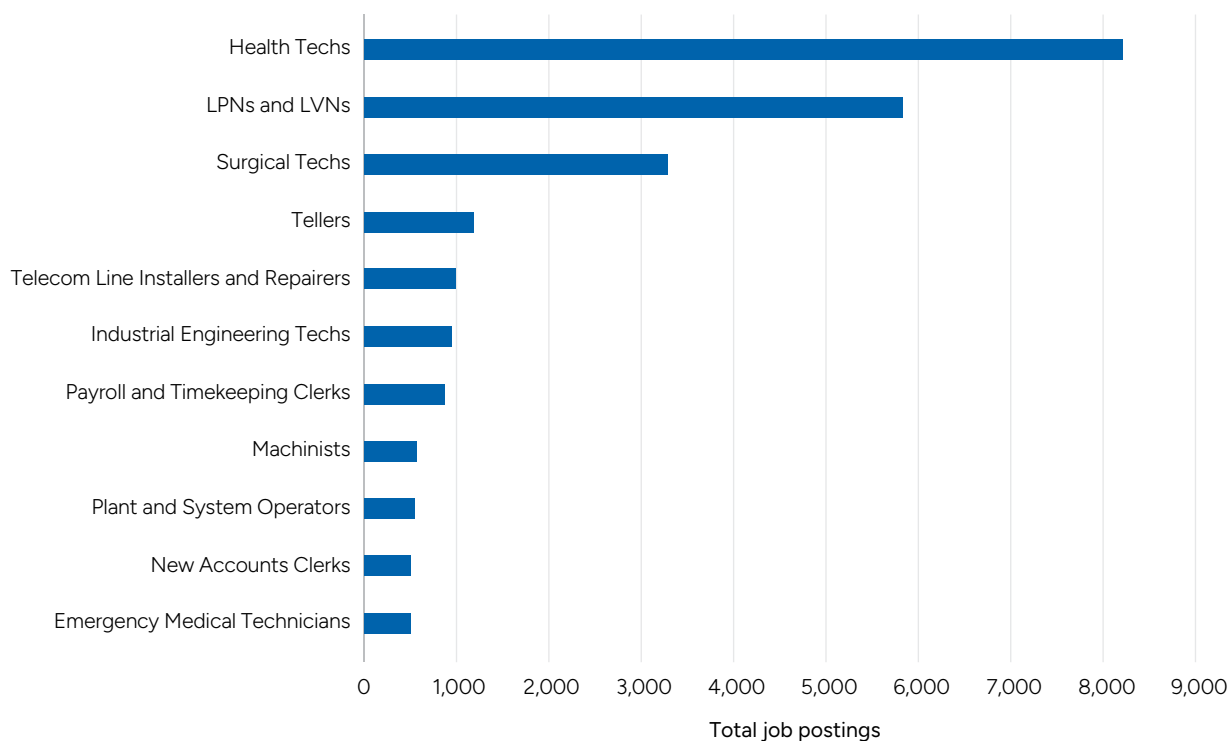
The scale of the opportunity is substantial: if employers hiring for these occupations built WBL pipelines comparable to more mature occupational categories, Colorado could support as many as 25,000 additional internships each year. The larger estimate reflects the fact that many of these occupations hire heavily at the entry level but currently lack structured pathways connecting students to those jobs.

Launchpad jobs. A 2024 report from the Burning Glass Institute and Britebound identified a set of “launchpad jobs”: occupations that offer strong starting wages and meaningful long-term mobility for workers entering directly from high school.^{xviii} The report found that workers who begin their careers in these roles are four times more likely to reach the top earnings quintile by age 40.

Colorado’s 20 launchpad occupations split roughly evenly between those with established WBL pipelines and those without. The pipeline-equipped group is anchored by Pharmacy Technicians, HR Assistants, and Buyers and Purchasing Agents. The underserved group is concentrated in healthcare and technical fields — Health Technologists, LPNs, Surgical Technologists, and Telecommunications Line Installers among them — where internship penetration sits between 0% and 3% of postings despite strong hiring demand. Bringing these underserved launchpad roles to parity with their pipeline-equipped peers would generate an estimated 4,800 to 10,600 additional internships annually in Colorado, all of which could be made accessible to youth and learners not pursuing a college degree.

The implication is important: many of the occupations most capable of launching young workers into stable, upwardly mobile careers remain largely disconnected from the state's existing WBL ecosystem. Building structured pathways into these fields is achievable, and the payoff is potentially large for both students and employers.

Figure Six. High-demand launchpad jobs lacking intern pipelines



Source: BGI analysis of Job Postings in Colorado (2018-2025)

Small and medium employers. Although small and rural businesses are considerably less likely than their urban peers to require degrees for the same jobs, they remain underrepresented in Colorado's internship market. The gap appears to stem less from participating employers offering dramatically fewer internships and more from the fact that many small and mid-sized firms do not participate in work-based learning at all. Small firms account for roughly two-thirds of Colorado employers but are about one-fourth as likely to offer internships as large employers. Medium-sized firms show similarly low participation rates and are only two-thirds as likely as large firms to offer internships.

Employer focus groups suggest this is less a matter of opposition than of capacity: smaller firms often lack the staff time, school relationships, and administrative infrastructure needed to recruit, supervise, and sustain WBL programs. That participation gap represents one of the state's clearest expansion opportunities. If Colorado could support broader participation among firms that currently do not engage in WBL, the state could dramatically expand internship capacity without relying solely on large employers to scale existing programs.

Path Two: Spur Natural Growth by Enriching Value to Employers

Targeted expansion can bring more employers into the WBL system, but sustained growth will depend on whether employers experience work-based learning as valuable enough to continue and expand on their own. Earlier sections of this report show that employers participate in WBL for three main reasons: to identify future hires, to generate useful work, and to build long-term awareness of their industry among young people. The more clearly programs deliver on those value propositions, the more likely employers are to increase the number of students they host.

This is especially important because many employers are already cautious about expanding internship programs when they cannot see a credible path from internship to employment. If WBL is experienced primarily as a community service obligation, participation will remain fragile. If it is designed as a structured early-talent strategy—one that helps students learn work by doing real work and helps employers solve actual entry-level talent needs—then growth becomes more durable.

Redesign internships to resemble entry-level work. Many internships, especially those designed for younger students, are built around exposure, observation, or loosely defined projects. Those experiences can be valuable, but they often ask employers to create work around the student rather than placing the student into a structured version of work the organization already needs done. That limits employer value and increases managerial burden.

A forthcoming Burning Glass Institute study documents wide disparity across sectors in the alignment between the skills used in internships and those required in entry-level work. Across industries, the average skill overlap between internship postings and entry-level jobs ranges from just 2.6% in Public Administration to 46.9% in Retail Trade, with an overall average of 25.5%. In some sectors, the alignment is so strong that there is greater similarity between the work of an intern and a first-year employee than there is between that of the first-year employee and peers at other firms. By contrast, in sectors such as Public Administration, Educational Services, and Utilities, each with less than 10% skill overlap between internships and entry-level jobs, internships often consist of ad hoc tasks that bear little resemblance to the work employees are ultimately hired to do, limiting the value of the experience for both students and employers.

The opportunity, then, is not to reinvent the internship model but to make the work assigned within it more deliberate. Employers can often increase the value of internships by mapping student tasks more closely to the supervised, age-appropriate components of entry-level roles: the routines, tools, workflows, and workplace behaviors that new hires are expected to master. This does not mean treating high school interns

as entry-level employees. It means moving away from improvised assignments and toward structured tasks that both advance student learning and contribute more directly to the work employers already need done.

For employers, the advantage is considerable. Internships that resemble entry-level work are easier to justify and easier to manage. Managers do not have to invent artificial assignments or design one-off projects each time a student arrives. Instead, they can draw from an existing map of repeatable tasks that are useful to the organization, appropriate for students, and aligned with the competencies required for future hiring. Over time, this creates a reusable internship architecture: a defined set of tasks, supervision routines, reflection prompts, and performance expectations that can be repeated across cohorts.

For students, the benefit is equally compelling: the learning they do on the job becomes more clearly connected to career entry. They are not merely observing a workplace or completing a generic project; they are practicing the kinds of tasks, communication norms, problem-solving routines, and professional expectations that shape early success in a field. A student interested in healthcare support should leave with some understanding of patient intake, documentation, confidentiality, scheduling, and team communication. A student exploring business operations should gain exposure to data entry, customer follow-up, inventory tracking, basic reporting, or workflow coordination. The closer the experience is to the real work of entry-level roles, the more transferable the learning becomes.

Innovation Underway: School-Embedded Career Preparation

Opened in 2019, the Cherry Creek Innovation Campus (CCIC) is a stand-alone college and career preparedness campus that gives high school students access to advanced career pathways while remaining enrolled in their home high schools. Students attend for half of the school day, with transportation provided districtwide. Through partnerships with employers, colleges, and community organizations, students access a range of opportunities—from Career Technical Education courses and industry-sponsored projects to internships, pre-apprenticeships, clinical experiences, and apprenticeships across pathways ranging from health sciences and infrastructure engineering to transportation and aerospace manufacturing.

CCIC has grown rapidly, enrolling more than 1,800 students in 2024–25 and recently securing a voter-approved expansion that will increase capacity by 70% and add new pathways such as HVAC, EMT, welding, and veterinary medicine. CCIC demonstrates how districts can lower barriers to participation by embedding career-connected learning into the structure of the school day.

Source: [Cherry Creek Innovation Campus website](#); Ballard, C. (2025, January 9). [Cherry Creek Innovation Campus expansion bringing nine new career paths](#). *Sentinel Colorado*.

This approach also helps address one of the central frictions in high school WBL: employer skepticism about student productivity. Employers who doubt the value of high school interns are unlikely to expand participation. Rather, the contribution needs to be tangible. Breaking entry-level work into trainable, supervised components gives employers a clearer answer to the question, “What can a high school student actually do here?” It also gives educators a clearer basis for preparing students before they enter the workplace.

Schools and intermediaries can play an important role by helping employers conduct this task-mapping. Rather than asking each employer to design an internship from scratch, regional partners could help translate entry-level occupations into student-ready work modules: common tasks, required preparation, workplace tools, safety considerations, supervision needs, and related academic or technical competencies. This would reduce the design burden on employers while making the student experience more coherent and career-relevant.

Increase conversion from intern to employee. A second opportunity is to strengthen the pathway from internship to employment. Earlier in the report, employers noted that they are reluctant to expand internships when they cannot offer a credible path to full-time work. That concern is real. But it also points to an opportunity: where conversion is possible, programs should be designed more intentionally to make it happen.

Conversion rates vary significantly by sector and employer. Some large professional-services firms, like Deloitte and EY, convert a substantial share of interns, often times two out of three, into full-time hires. Other sectors, like state and local governments, use internships primarily for exposure or short-term support, converting fewer than 20% of interns to full time roles.^{xix} In occupations with low conversion rates, the issue may not be that internships lack value; it may be that the pathway from student participation to employment is poorly defined.

Employers can increase conversion by making the internship a more reliable test of entry-level potential. That starts with defining the competencies associated with success in the roles the employer actually hires for—punctuality, communication, task completion, customer interaction, problem-solving, teamwork, safety practices, and role-specific technical skills—and giving students feedback against them. This gives students a clearer developmental target, but its central value is to employers: it turns the internship from a general exposure experience into a structured way to identify, assess, and reengage future workers.

In sectors where conversion rates are low, the first step is to diagnose why. In some cases, internships are too disconnected from the work of entry-level roles to function as a talent pipeline. In others placements are poorly aligned with hiring cycles; employers lack mechanisms for staying connected to students after the experience ends; or there is no defined bridge from high school participation into part-time work, summer employment, apprenticeship, credential-bearing training, or eventual full-time employment. Each problem calls for a different intervention: redesigning intern tasks, timing placements around seasonal hiring, creating post-internship talent pools, offering return opportunities, or connecting WBL to the credentials employers already use in hiring.

This is not a call to make every WBL experience a hiring pipeline. Work-based learning also serves exposure, confidence-building, skill development, and career clarification. But where employers do have entry-level

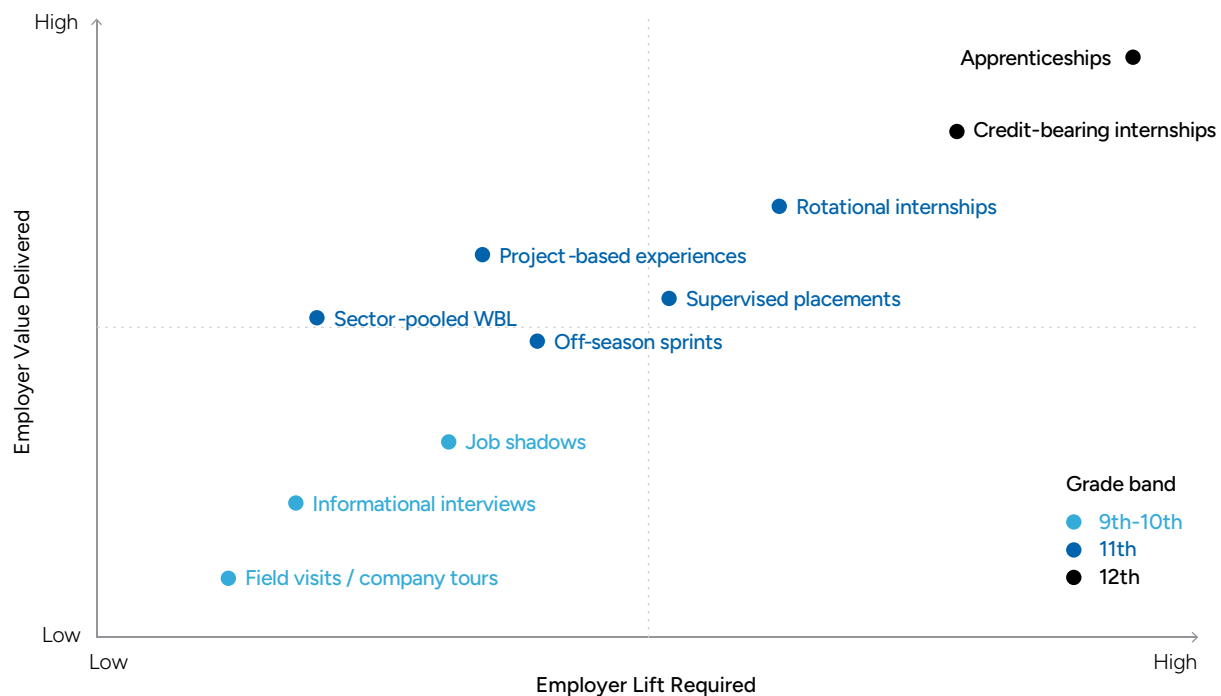
talent needs, conversion value is the strongest business case for expansion. Strengthening the bridge from internship to employment would make the existing model more attractive to employers and more valuable to students, creating the conditions for growth that depends less on persuasion, subsidy, or civic goodwill.

Path Three: New Models

Even with both targeted expansion in high-demand occupations and value-driven growth in existing areas, Colorado will not reach its Big Three goal through the incumbent model alone. The current system is built for college students, large employers, and traditional 9-to-5 schedules — none of which fit a high school student. Meeting the 2029 goal requires building a continuum of experiences that starts earlier and asks less of employers.

Build new WBL models for high school students. Students do not start with an internship. They start with curiosity about what the working world looks like. Colorado should expand its [Work-based Learning Continuum](#) and map it onto students' high school journeys, building a sequence that begins in grades 9 and 10 with career exposure and deepens toward structured, credit-bearing experiences in grades 11 and 12. This sequencing matters for employers as much as for students. A sophomore who has toured a logistics facility, shadowed a nurse, and conducted an informational interview with a civil engineer arrives at a junior-year internship already knowing something about professional environments and the field they are entering. They are easier to onboard and more likely to contribute quickly. For small and mid-sized employers who

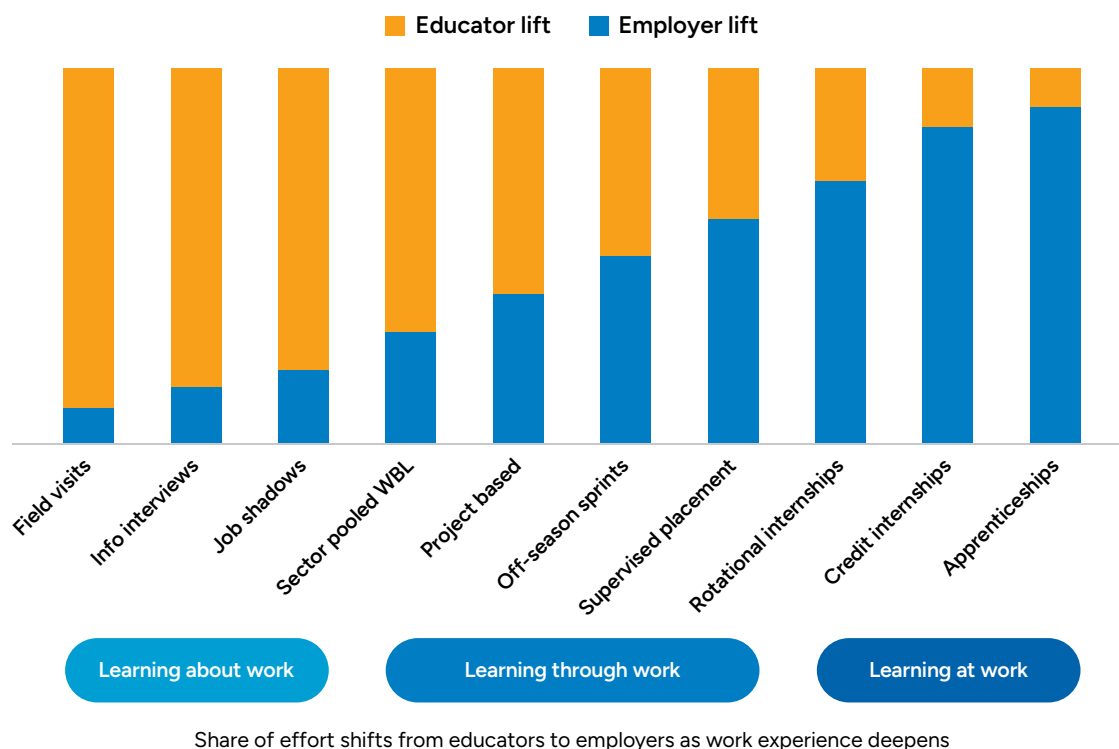
Figure Seven. A Model for Every Employer



Source: BGI analysis and focus groups with Colorado employers

cannot run a full internship program, lighter-touch models remove the barrier to entry entirely. A job shadow requires a host, not a hiring manager. A field visit requires a few hours, not a summer. And these models build relationships between schools, students, and small employers without the high upfront cost of starting an internship program from scratch.

Figure Eight. The WBL Continuum: From Exposure to Experience



Two newer models extend this logic further. Employer-sourced project challenges, modeled on platforms like [Riipen](#), allow companies to post real business problems for student teams to work on as coursework. One employer problem can engage an entire classroom. The employer investment is two to three hours of engagement, not a summer of supervision. Micro-internships, structured as five- to forty-hour paid project assignments, give small and mid-sized employers with sporadic talent needs a way to participate without committing to a full program – or without having to make a permanent hire. These are not consolation prizes for either employers or students. They are a different kind of value exchange, better suited to the majority of Colorado’s employer base than the traditional model has ever been. Both of these models – while early, and yet to grow at the scale necessary – are promising because they work outside of a 9-5 schedule and can be low-lift for employers. They may not fully meet the definition of an internship but still provide meaningful experience for future workers. The goal here is not to produce 60,000 WBL placements at once. It is consistent base hits: broad, accessible, repeatable experiences that widen the funnel.

In addition, some models that are still in early phases of piloting offer considerable promise:

The Sector Pool: Shared Infrastructure for Small Employers, Initiated by Sector Partnerships. The administrative burden of a WBL program does not scale down with employer size. A 15-person HVAC firm faces the same intake forms, school coordination, and documentation requirements as Lockheed Martin but without the dedicated recruiting team to absorb those burdens. Sector Pooling models address this directly. A group of employers in the same sector – be it food service, construction, auto service, or residential care – collectively fund a shared WBL coordinator in a model similar to CareerWise, hosted by a community college, chamber, or workforce intermediary, who handles everything the employer cannot: student matching, school communication, documentation, and compliance. Each employer provides a workplace and a commitment to host three or four students per year. A single coordinator can manage 60 to 80 placements annually across 15 to 20 employers. The individual ask is modest, but collectively, the sector can have significant throughput of WBL opportunities for teens.

The Off-Season Sprint: Turning Slow Periods into Structured Learning. Many sectors in Colorado's economy run on seasonal rhythms: Christmas tree nurseries tend to be busiest from October through April; helium distributors have a slow season after Valentine's Day until Halloween season; and ski resorts are mostly in maintenance mode during the summer months. During that slack, employers have something rare: time and staff available to teach. The Off-Season Sprint converts that window into structured WBL: a cohort of 8 to 12 students spends two to four concentrated weeks at the employer during its slow period, rotating through operations, working on a defined project with real stakes, and presenting learnings before they leave. The employer designs the experience once, the supervisory cost spreads across the whole cohort, and the total time investment is roughly what a single traditional internship requires, at ten times the reach. For students, a two-week block during winter or spring break does not compete with coursework or existing jobs: it is contained, completable in a single academic year, and potentially documentable against Colorado Department of Education's quality standards for Learning Through Work. Colorado has hundreds of seasonal employers who have never considered themselves WBL providers because they assumed WBL meant only summer or year-round commitments, but it does not have to.

The key question in new model innovation: what counts as Work-Based Learning? Purely exposure-driven activities like informational interviews, while valuable, are not "work-based" and don't build the types of on-the-job skills workers use every day. But we would propose that project-based work, rotational internships, and other medium-touch experiences where students are working on real problems in the workforce all meet the "learning through work" or "learning at work" definitions that Colorado has put forward.

Path Four: Integrate Existing Student Work into the Classroom to Make It Count

Not all students can participate in structured WBL programs. Many work to contribute to household income, and their schedules and financial obligations cannot accommodate an unpaid internship or even a formal placement process. A WBL system designed only for students with available time and supportive family circumstances is not a system that reaches the full population the Big Three goal intends to serve. About 21% of Colorado high schoolers already work part or full time. The share among students from low-income and working-class families is considerably higher. Some tactical changes could create a venue for this work to meaningfully count as WBL experiences.

Recent research supports that near-continuous employment during high school promotes long-term socioeconomic attainment.^{xx} Critically, this holds even when adolescent workers move into jobs in unrelated fields as adults. The mechanism is not industry-specific skill accumulation. It is the development of durable, cross-sector competencies: what the Burning Glass Institute's recent report, *"Which Skills Matter Now?"* labels intermediating skills: the capacities that remain valuable as tasks change, technology shifts, and careers evolve.^{xxi} Students learn these through work in ways that classroom instruction does not replicate. The implication is significant: a high schooler working in food service is already building a foundation. The policy question is whether that foundation is being built deliberately or by accident – and how to facilitate tighter integration between what students are learning in their jobs and what they are learning at school.

Transforming existing employment into structured WBL means tilting the experience toward the tasks that develop intermediating skills — customer service, managing competing priorities, navigating workplace policies and their consequences, communicating across hierarchies — and away from tasks that are purely discrete and non-transferable. Dishwashing and order entry are not the WBL experience. Learning to handle a difficult customer, manage a rush, or train a new colleague is, especially when there's an engaged manager providing coaching and mentorship throughout.

Consider food service, where 35% of working Colorado high schoolers are employed. A student working a shift is managing competing priorities under pressure, communicating across hierarchies, learning to read a room, and recovering from mistakes in real time. These are durable skills: irreducibly human competencies that AI is not poised to replicate and that employers consistently rank among the most valuable. They are not incidental byproducts of a food service job but rather are precisely the skills the labor market needs most.

45,000 Colorado high school students are already in a workplace. The question is how to make the work they are already doing more relevant to what they are learning in the classroom.

Figure Nine: Teen Jobs Build Transferable Workforce Skills

Everyday tasks in Food Service reinforce foundational skills tied to communication, compliance, problem solving, and customer service.

	Ethical reasoning			Spatial reasoning		Critical reading		Oral communication			Math problem-solving			Active listening		Intercultural	
	Food safety	Guest relations	Regulatory compliance	Stocking merchandise	Inventory staging	Detail oriented	Technical documentation	Customer service	Selling techniques	Order entry	Cash register	Arithmetic	Financial modeling	Multitasking	Clinical documentation	Disabilities	Professionalism
Accept payment from customers and make change																	
Communicate with customers about orders, comments, and complaints																	
Wrap menu items: sandwiches, hot entrées, and desserts																	
Add relishes and garnishes to food according to instructions																	
Plan, prepare, delivery meals for dietary restrictions																	
Arrange tables and decorations according to instructions																	
Balance receipts and cash registers																	
Speak clearly so others understand; understand others' speech																	

Transforming existing employment into structured WBL does not require moving students to new jobs. It requires three additions: structured reflection tools that help students notice and name the skills they are developing, skill-mapping frameworks that connect those competencies to career pathways, and employer guidance on how to design and coach tasks in ways that tilt the experience toward transferable competency.

Transforming existing employment into meaningful WBL also requires a shift in curriculum and pedagogy. If students are already learning through work, schools need better ways to help them recognize, interpret, and connect that learning to academic and career development. The burden cannot fall primarily on employers to make every part-time job educational. Nor is it realistic to assume that students can be placed only in jobs that neatly align with their coursework or career goals. A more scalable approach is to design classroom learning so that students can draw on the work experiences they already have—wherever they occur—and use them as material for reflection, skill development, and applied learning.

That means building structured opportunities for students to bring workplace experiences back into the classroom. Students working in food service may not be studying hospitality management, but they are encountering questions of communication, time pressure, customer behavior, teamwork, sequencing, error recovery, and managerial decision-making. Students working in retail may be observing inventory systems, consumer preferences, sales targets, workplace hierarchy, and conflict resolution. Not every task is educationally meaningful on its own. But with the right classroom prompts, assignments, and facilitation, ordinary workplace experiences can become evidence students use to understand concepts, practice analysis, and name the transferable skills they are developing.

This requires more than asking students to write occasional reflections about their jobs. Schools would need curricular tools that help teachers translate workplace experience into academic and career-relevant learning: journals tied to specific competencies, assignments that ask students to analyze a workplace process or communication challenge, classroom discussions that compare how different workplaces solve similar problems, and capstone projects that connect students' paid work to broader questions about industry, technology, labor markets, or career pathways. The pedagogical move is to treat students' work experience not as extracurricular background, but as an applied text: something students can examine, interpret, and connect to what they are learning in school.

Done well, this approach would make classroom learning more concrete and make work experience more developmental. It would help students see that the skills they build on the job are not isolated from school, and that academic concepts are not disconnected from the places where they earn a paycheck. For educators, it creates a way to make WBL available even when formal placements are scarce. For students, it turns existing employment from an accidental learning environment into a more deliberate one. The goal is not to declare every job or every task equivalent to high-quality WBL. It is to build a curriculum that can extract educational value from the work students are already doing while helping them distinguish between routine labor and transferable learning.

The practical implication is significant: Colorado does not need to wait for 45,000 students to be placed in new settings before recognizing the learning potential of work. Many students are already in workplaces. The challenge is to build the educational infrastructure that helps them make sense of what they are experiencing there.

This does not mean counting every job as WBL by default. It means creating a framework through which existing employment can become more intentional: connecting students' jobs to transferable skills, reflecting on workplace dynamics, and learning how those skills travel across occupations. In this model, scale comes not from asking every employer to redesign every job, but from helping schools turn work students already do into learning they can name, interpret, and build on.

Section V: Near-Term Actions

Closing the gap between demand for work-based learning and system capacity will require coordinated action across employers, policymakers, and intermediaries. Expansion and innovation alone will not suffice. The system must be made easier to use, more measurable, and better aligned across actors. Four moves can accelerate progress without waiting for new legislation.

Remove Friction Where It Is Blocking Participation

Colorado employers identified three barriers most consistently in BGI's focus groups: union concerns, insurance liability, and regulations governing employment for minors. None are as prohibitive as they appear.

Union resistance typically centers on the risk that WBL participants will displace existing workers. That concern can be – and has been, by many Colorado employers – addressed by ensuring participants are paid, designing experiences that complement rather than substitute existing roles, and helping union leadership see that today's student workers are tomorrow's members.

Insurance liability is more closely tied to task design than to participant age. Structuring allowable activities appropriately reduces exposure and, in many cases, qualifies employers for existing exemptions – there isn't a hard-and-fast rule under most insurance plans that says minors cannot be employed. In the same vein, regulations governing employment for minors are real and can be restrictive in some domains, but are not absolute. Clear guidance from the state Department of Labor on compliant roles can expand what is seen as feasible within existing statutes without changing a single law.

The employers most likely to act on this guidance are small and mid-sized businesses, which lack the HR and legal capacity to navigate these questions independently. Targeted technical assistance, delivered through intermediaries like COBRT and SyncUp, can move an employer from “this is too complicated” to “here is how to start.”

Measure What Matters and Disaggregate the Data

Scaling WBL without measurement is how inequitable systems scale. Colorado should establish explicit participation targets by sector, geography, and demographic group and report results with enough granularity to see who is being reached and who is not.

The baseline is clear – students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds on average have lower access to internships than non-Hispanic white students in Colorado. For example, Hispanic students represent 36% of Colorado's young adult population and 7% of its intern pool. That gap highlights a key dimension on which WBL investment should be judged. Growth that does not close it is not serving the Big Three goal.

WBL also carries a historical warning. Career and technical education, which has served as the primary pathway for high school WBL, has a legacy of tracking students of color and low-income students away

from college and into constrained options. Equitable WBL expansion requires active monitoring to ensure the new system does not reproduce that pattern in a new form.

This is especially important for lighter-touch models. As the WBL landscape expands to include field visits, job shadows, and structured reflections on existing employment, the field must be honest about what each model delivers. Participation is not impact. Measurement must distinguish between exposure and genuine skill development.

Use Existing Policy Levers to Expand Capacity

Several tools are already available. Colorado's Work-Based Learning Incentive Program (WBLIP) demonstrated that even modest financial incentives bring in employers who would not otherwise participate. Expanding that program, simplifying its administrative requirements, and targeting it explicitly at launchpad jobs and underserved geographies is the most direct supply-side lever the state controls.

Community colleges are an underused asset. Dual enrollment is at historically high levels. And as Chancellor of the Colorado Community College System Dr. Marielena DeSanctis points out, 97% of community college graduates stay in the state. The Colorado Community College System has both the employer relationships and the geographic reach to serve as a WBL coordination hub for high school students. Realizing it requires sustained financial support for institutions that have long been underfunded relative to their ambitions.

At the federal level, clearer Department of Labor guidance on youth employment exemptions would reduce uncertainty for the small and mid-sized employers who represent the most promising frontier for WBL expansion but are least equipped to navigate regulatory ambiguity on their own.

Coordinate Across a Fragmented System

Scaling WBL requires alignment across a fragmented set of actors. Employers, schools, intermediaries, and policymakers are often working toward similar goals without shared infrastructure or coordination. This creates duplication, inefficiency, and, in some cases, competition for limited opportunities.

A designated coordinating entity can reduce this fragmentation. Its role is not to centralize control, but to align effort. Key functions include:

- Providing employers with clear entry points and guidance on how to start, with varied entry points based on the organization's size, maturity, and capacity
- Establishing regional coordination to balance statewide goals with local needs
- Sharing guidance on managing structural barriers and perceived legal/insurance barriers to the expansion of WBL opportunities
- Preparing students to participate effectively, reducing recruitment and onboarding burden for employers

- Developing shared tools and curricula to support structured, high-quality experiences
- Identifying and designing WBL programs that work around high school students' availability

Without coordination, growth in one part of the system can constrain another. With it, capacity can expand more efficiently—and more effectively.

A Note on Limits

Work-based learning is neither a substitute for all other pathways nor a guarantee of economic mobility. Evidence shows that while internships and related experiences improve employment outcomes, they do not eliminate structural differences across fields of study. Students in fields with strong labor market alignment benefit more than those in fields with weaker alignment, even when both participate in WBL.^{xxii}

A Call To Action

Colorado has set an audacious goal, built real infrastructure, and surfaced real constraints. What is needed now is specific commitment from the actors who can move the system.

For employers: If your organization or sector is struggling to find talent and the WBL pipeline is either small or nonexistent, partner with others in your field and with intermediaries to put a WBL plan in motion. Keep in mind that you do not have to run a large internship program to participate in work-based learning. Company tours and projects are good places to start. If you already employ high school students, as many Colorado businesses in food service, retail, and recreation do, the question is whether you are being deliberate about what those students are learning. The employers in this report that are doing this well are not always the largest or the most sophisticated, but they are intentional.

For funders: The opportunity will not be closed by public funding alone. Philanthropic investment is most needed in three places: intermediary infrastructure that coordinates supply and demand across a fragmented system, curricular tools and frameworks that can transform existing teen employment into structured WBL at scale, and data infrastructure that ensures expansion produces equity rather than just volume. The field needs proof of concept for the new models, and philanthropic capital is likely the right instrument to generate it.

For policymakers and educators: Achieving the Big Three goal requires making the system easier to navigate, more equitable in design, and willing to embrace new models for work-based learning. It also requires protecting what already works: the small programs, the district-level partnerships, and the community-rooted experiences that never appear in statewide data but constitute the daily reality of WBL for the students who do access it.

Colorado is not just trying to expand work-based learning. It is tackling constraints that have impacted access to this vital employment on-ramp and engine for economic growth for decades. The state has committed the resources to build the infrastructure, employer networks, and policy commitments needed to pursue ambitious goals based on measurable targets. But structural problems require structural answers, and efforts to do more of the same will run up against the realities of entry-level hiring downswings, large employers feeling capped out on internship programs, and colleges eating up much of the space for incumbent WBL models.

The four paths described in this report are intended contributions toward those answers. Targeted expansion into sectors and geographies the current system has bypassed will add meaningful capacity. Structural redesign, through new models that reduce employer lift and through deliberately building on the work experience that 45,000 Colorado students already have, will build up the rest.

A Note on Data and Methodology

BGI's analysis in this report draws on two primary proprietary data sources: a database of tens of millions of current and historical job postings covering Colorado and the United States from 2018 to 2025, and a database of career histories for more than 65 million American workers, which allows BGI to track career trajectories, wage outcomes, and employment patterns over time.

The analysis focuses primarily on internships as the most consistently observable WBL model in labor market data at scale. Internships are identified based on keywords in job titles and postings, including intern, extern, co-op, cooperative, summer associate, summer analyst, and summer program. This definition excludes some forms of WBL that do not appear in formal job postings, including informal apprenticeships and some structured school-based experiences.

Outcome data on wage premiums, retention, and promotion rates are drawn from BGI analysis of career history data, using comparison groups matched on education level, field, and employer characteristics. Data on Colorado high school student employment are drawn from BGI analysis of IPUMS Current Population Survey data (2025).

Because high school-specific WBL outcome data are limited, this report uses college internship outcomes as the primary evidence base, with the research on Career Academies providing the most direct high school-level evidence. This is an appropriate but imperfect comparison. High school WBL programs vary significantly in design, and outcomes will differ across contexts. The evidence on career academy earnings gains (MDRC, 2008) is now more than 15 years old, though it remains the strongest experimental evidence available.

This report was produced in partnership with the Colorado Business Roundtable. Employer focus groups were convened by COBRT and included participants from many of the largest employers in Colorado across a diverse array of sectors.

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