

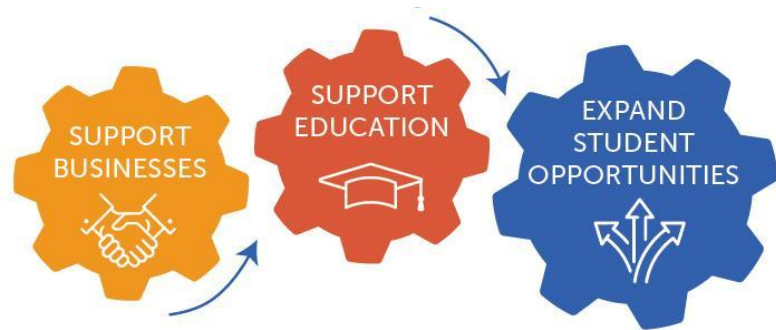
2026 WBLC Update: High School Data

An update of Montana student and educator perspectives on career-connected learning

Work-based Learning Collaborative

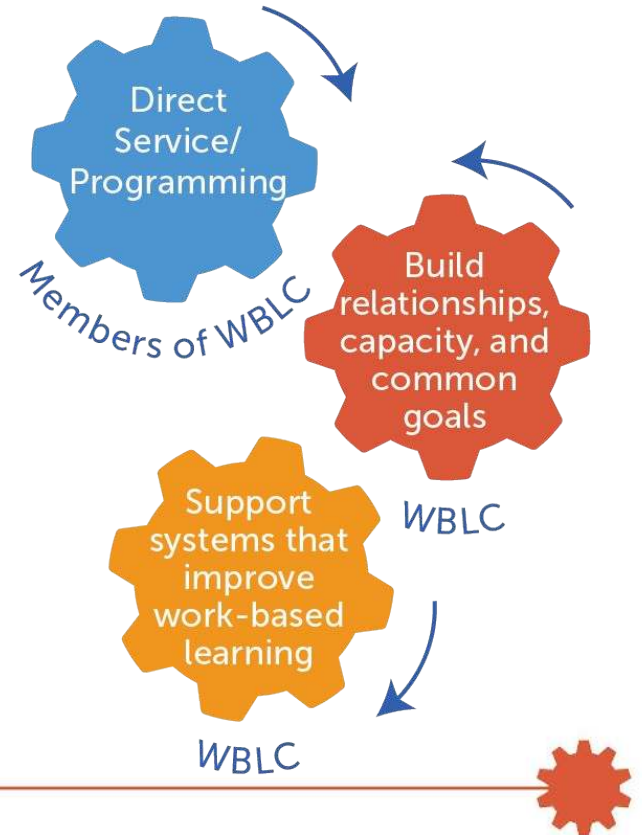
Vision: *Every young adult in Montana will have multiple pathways to economic mobility, supported by a statewide work-based learning system that honors the potential of students and addresses the workforce needs of Montana businesses, today and tomorrow.*

- Formed: 2021
- Members: 30+ private, public, or nonprofit organizations
- Staff: Director & Data Analyst



Role of Work-based Learning Collaborative

- Convene stakeholders
- Collect and share data around career-connected learning in Montana
- Share best practices, policy information, and drive innovation
- Develop tools and supports to help stakeholders execute high-quality WBL
- Deliver workshops and provide technical support



Why WBLC Collects & Shares Data

Share learner, educator, and employer insights with stakeholders

Inform data-driven programs and policies

Support effective resource management

Facilitate collaboration by highlighting strengths and opportunities across Montana

Track long-term effectiveness and system-wide outcomes of WBL activities



What Do We Mean by Career-connected Learning?

Career Awareness

- Interest Inventories
- Guest Speakers
- Career Fairs
- Workplace Tours
- Community Involvement

Career Exploration

- Informational Interviews
- Job Shadows/Externships
- Industry Design Challenge
- Project-based Learning
- Career-focused Summer Camps
- Career and Technical Student Organizations

Work-based Learning and Training

- Internships
- Student-run Enterprise
- Service Learning
- Supported Employment
- Pre-Apprenticeship
- Assistantships
- Clinicals
- Practicum
- Youth Apprenticeship
- Apprenticeship
- Industry Recognized Credentials
- On-the-job Training



High School Student Youth

841 total participants, 77 total schools

Information was
collected between Fall
2022 and Spring 2026

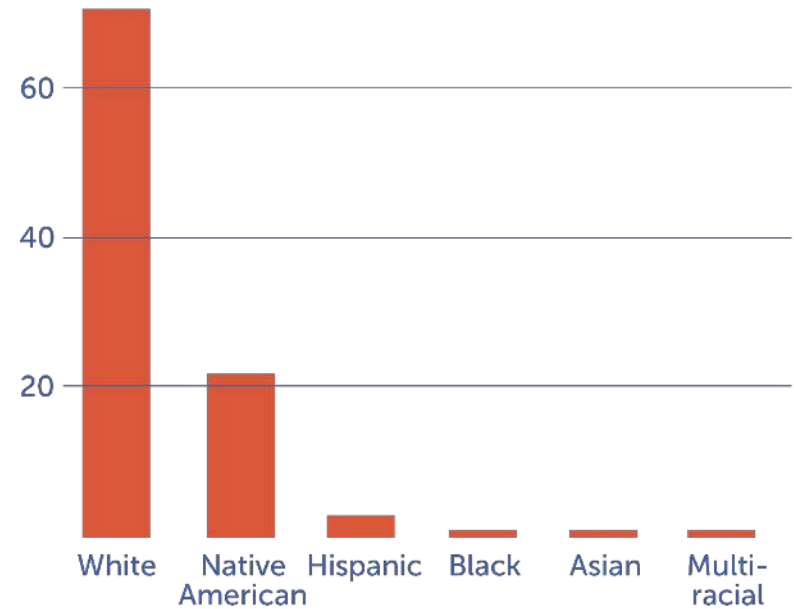
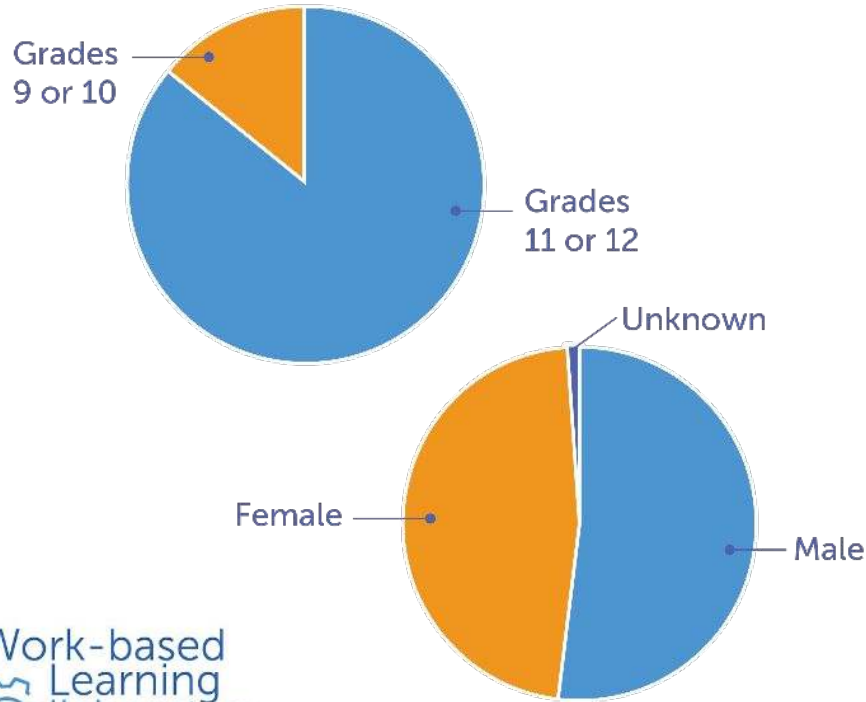
Schools from across
the state ranging in size
from class C to AA

Rural, urban,
& tribal schools
represented

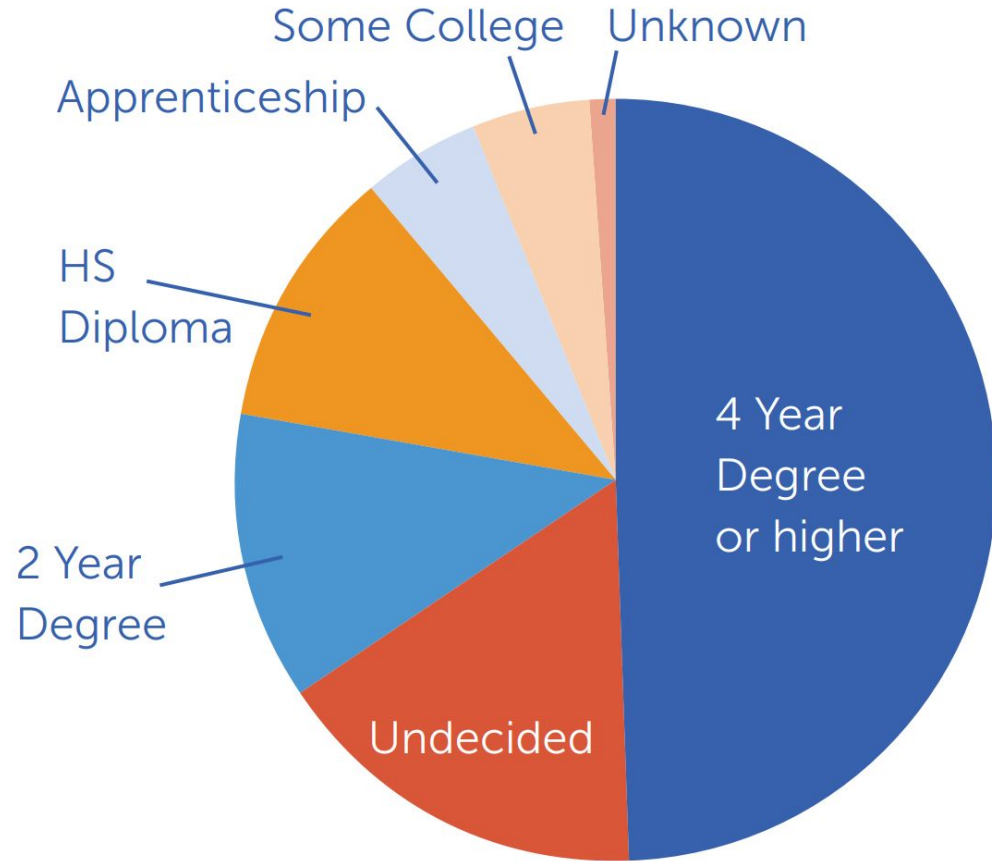


Who are the Students?

841 total participants, 77 total schools



Educational Aspirations



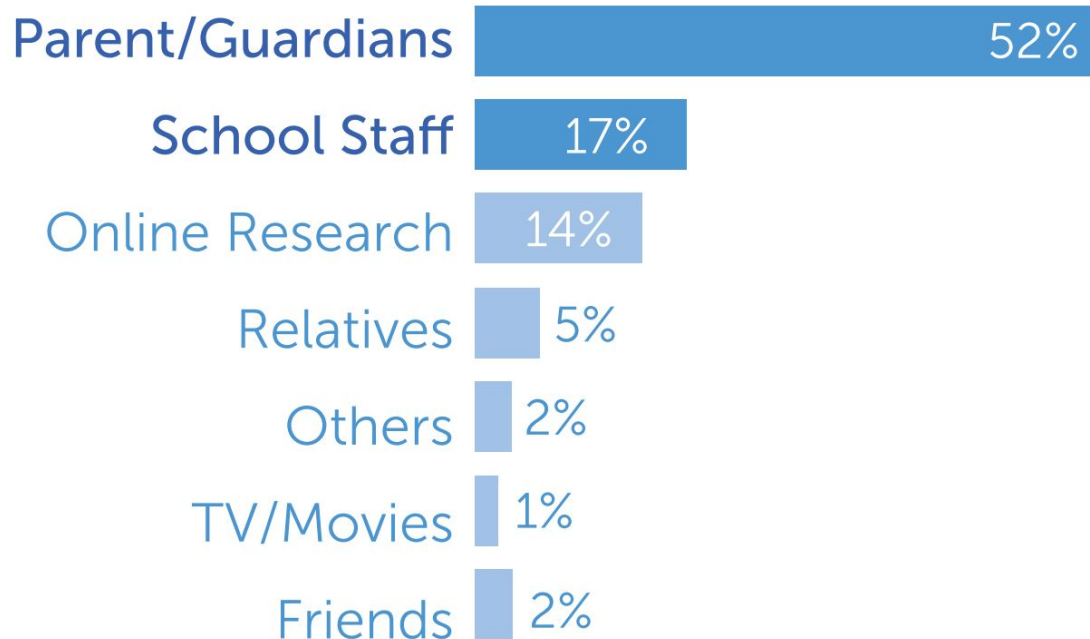
What do Montana high school students say?



Most helpful sources for learning about careers

High school students

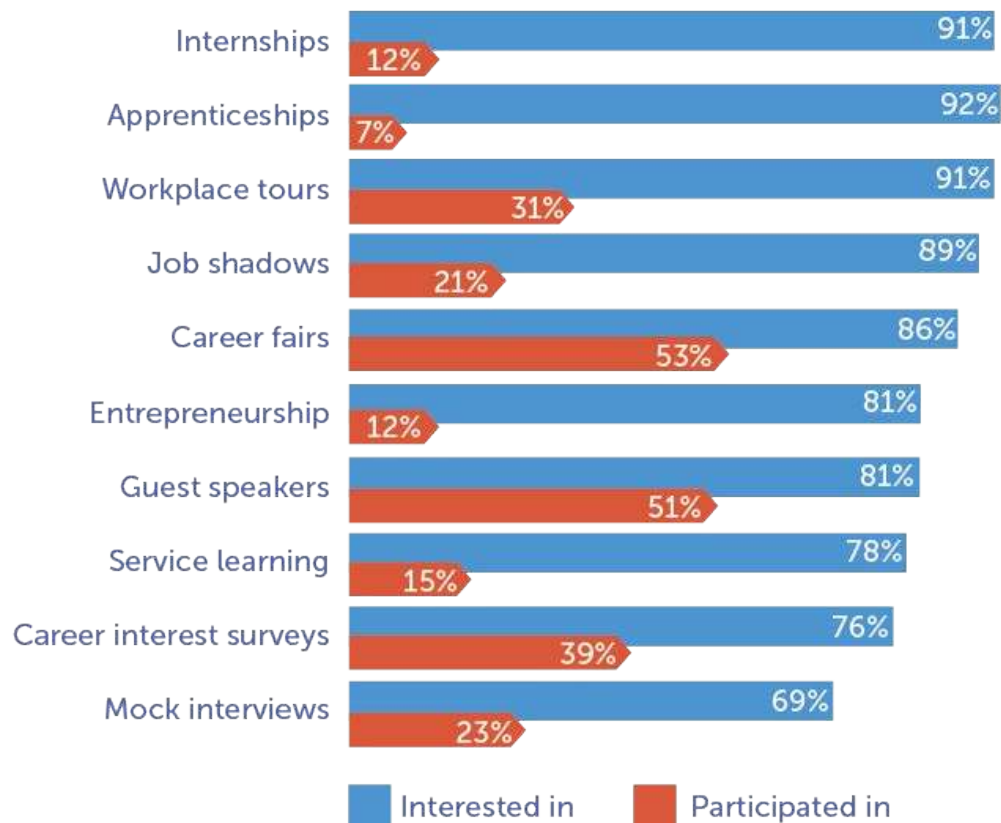
Half of the youth said that **parents or guardians were their primary source** of career information. Under a quarter of students said they rely on educators for this.



What does happiness and career success look like?



Student Interest and Experience in Career-Connected Learning



How does this compare to what MT employers say?

Interest in Work-based learning and Career-connected Activities

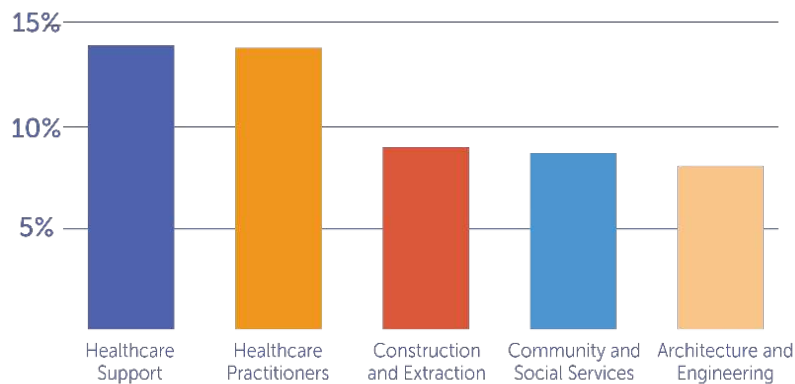
Students showed most interest in these activities:



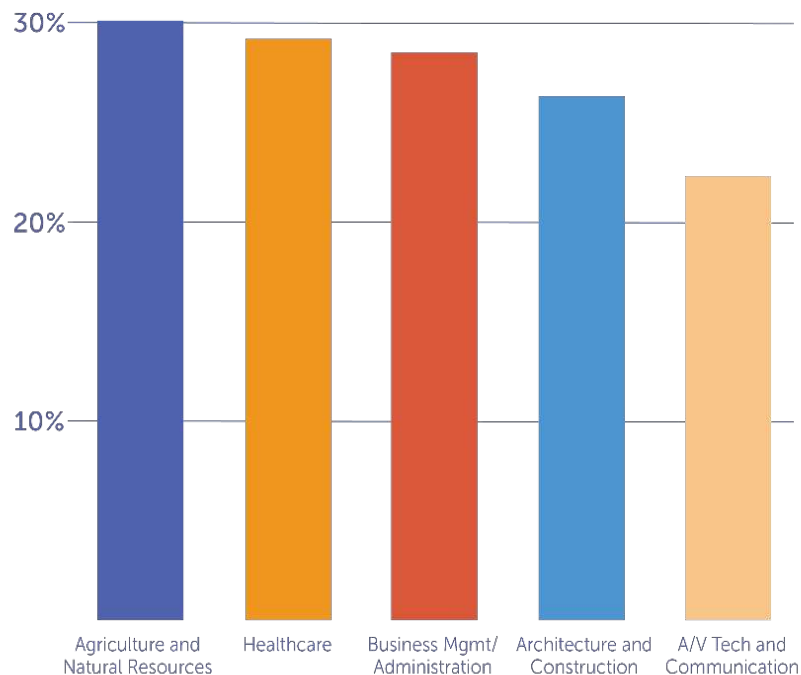
Employers showed most interest in providing these activities:



Fastest growing job fields in MT:



Top 5 student career field interests:



Occupation projections by the Montana Department of Labor & Industry for 2024-2034.

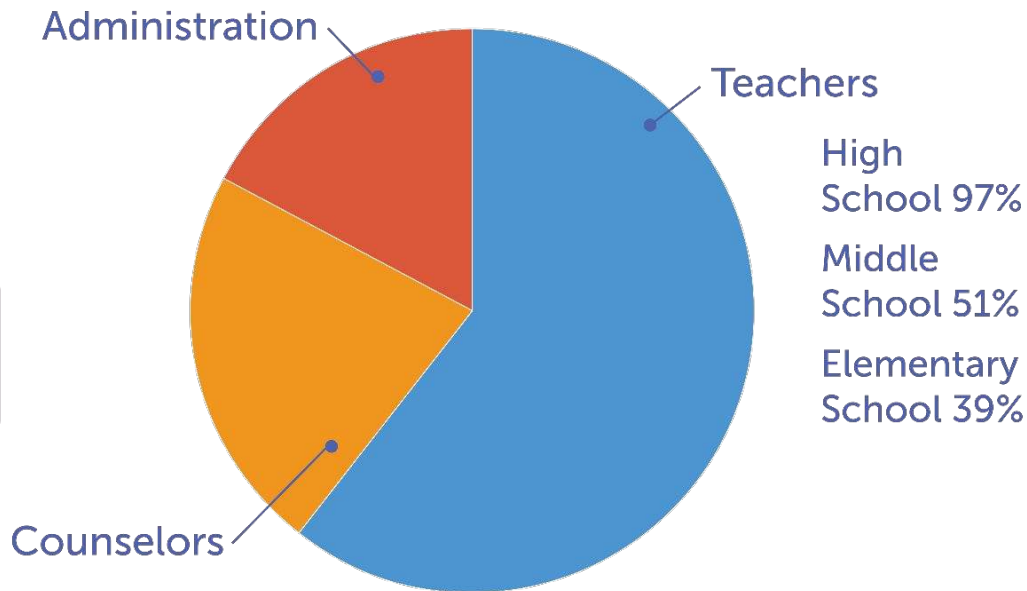


Educators

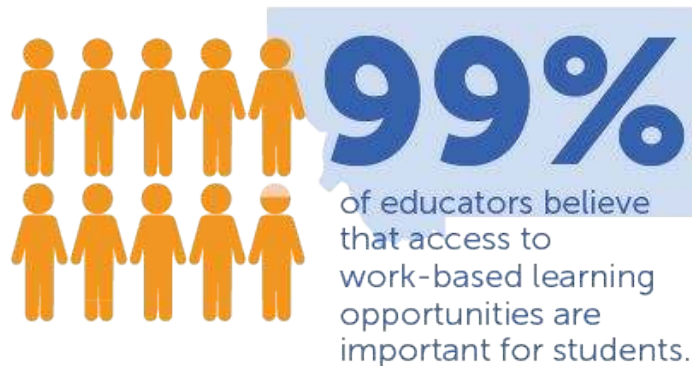
174 total participants, 151 total schools

Information collected
Fall 2023 - Fall 2025

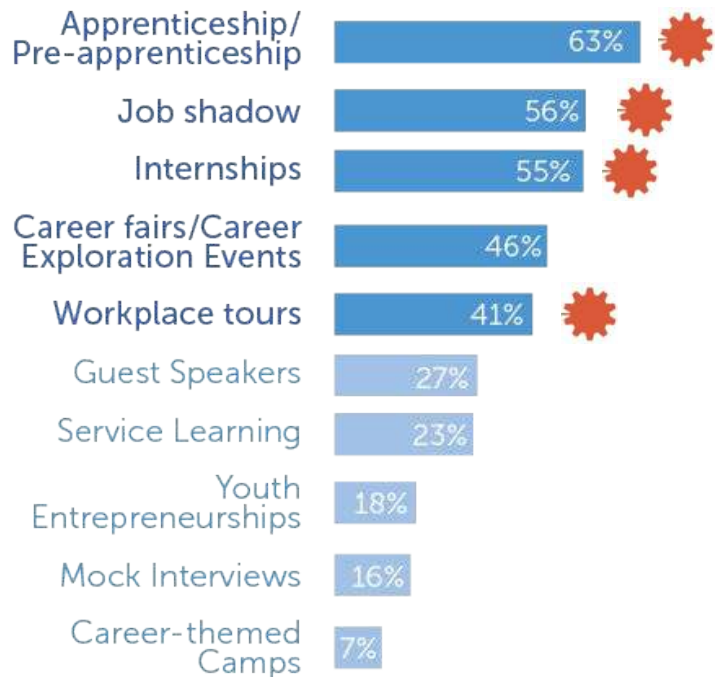
Rural, urban, & tribal
elementary, middle, and
high schools ranging in
size from class C to AA



What do MT educators say?



Most Important Career Connected Activities for Students, according to Educators



Biggest barriers for student access to career-connected learning opportunities

Educator perspective



Industry standards are out of alignment with parallel content standards.

Finding time to fit opportunities in students' already busy schedules.

Money and transportation for students, especially in rural areas.

Small number of students and few employers in our little community.

Youth interest in career-connected learning

I'd like to see activities for different career paths. It's largely focused on trades in my experience"

There needs to be more talk and teaching about the real world because grades don't mean success.

We need to feel more comfortable in being able to find what we are actually interested in.



Advice for educators

From high school students

Students want **support from educators to help them access opportunities.**



Make work-based learning more known, by announcements and presentations.

Spend time exploring careers, personal finance, and education on jobs.

More time throughout the school day to participate [in WBL].

Advice for employers

From high school students

Students want employers to know that they want **meaningful work experience that relates to career development.**



Give us some grace,
we don't know
what we are doing.

Be brutally honest
(don't sugar coat the
job). Explain what
skills you actually
need and how much
time the job takes.

Advice for educators and employers

From high school students

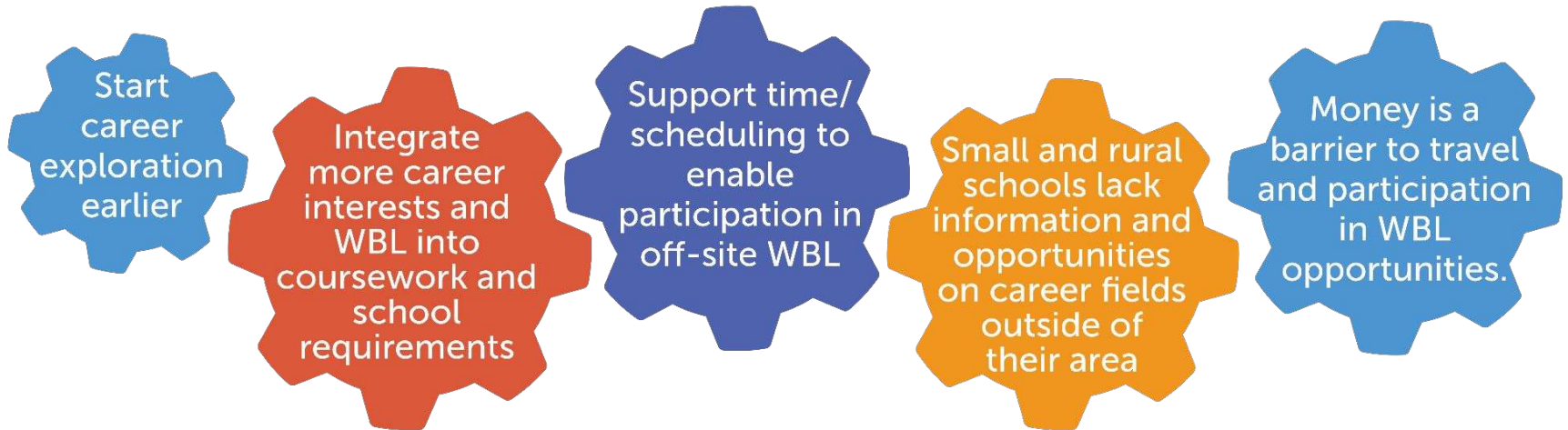
Students want to be **respected and supported by both educators and employers.**



Tell me the expectations ahead of time. Start slow, do not assume I know what to do. Give me an opportunity to learn.

Respect our intelligence, provide a good mentor, have patience. Make it hands on. Let us be involved in more than one aspect of the career.

Themes that emerged:



Feedback from a smaller, but still significant, number of students:

Recommend more activity and sector variety

- Activities are commonly related to construction and agriculture
- Suggest adding more finance, health, or adjacent activities

Career fairs have limited usefulness/application for some; other students love them

Connect activities (i.e. guest speakers, tours) to learning goals or related assignments

Would like CCL integrated into classroom

Recommend CCL opportunities start early in high school or even middle school



Students' sense of belonging at work

Approximately

80% of students

agree or strongly agree that they feel welcomed and included at their workplace.



70% agree or strongly agree that their employer organization values them and their contributions.

One in three

students does not feel comfortable expressing themselves and being their authentic selves at work.



I felt like I belonged when:

"When I am trusted to do more complex jobs and work through things on my own."

"I am told that I am appreciated by my coworkers."

"I got included in the Christmas party planning even though I don't have a steady work schedule. It felt nice to be included and remembered."



I felt like I didn't belong when:

A smiling Black woman with short hair, wearing a bright yellow hoodie, is pointing her right hand towards a large orange speech bubble. The background is white.

"As a female in a male dominated field naturally makes me feel displaced. My instructor made it worse by telling my coworkers to be polite to me 'because I'm a girl'."

"Just watching everything happen and not being allowed to help."

"Getting yelled at for not knowing what to do."



What matters most?

- Nearly half of all Montana students are unsatisfied with the career exploration opportunities currently available to them.
- Students want more hands-on opportunities so they can experience what the job might be like.
- Student career interests largely align with industry job projections.



The One Thing to Remember

The foundations exist for connecting students to careers *but* more work needs to be done to increase student awareness of opportunities and Help them feel valued by companies and the workforce.



Additional WBLC Data Resources

Explore more insights on the WBLC Data dashboard at wblmt.org/data-dashboard

Data executive summaries can be found at wblmt.org/reports

Sign up for Work-based Learning Collaborative monthly newsletters at wblmt.org



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