

Strengthening Career-connected Learning in Montana High Schools: Insights from educators and students



What do educators identify as barriers to career-connected learning (CCL) opportunities for their students?

- Difficulty of getting business buy-in and support

“Currently, we have little information on which companies or industries offer programs for students in our area, and cold-calling businesses has proven ineffective.”

- Time restraints on educators, students, and businesses
 - Educators lack additional instructional time and lack the capacity to find and build relationships with employers
 - Students have classes, extracurricular activities, work, etc.
 - Businesses have limited capacity to offer opportunities

- Turnover in school districts and businesses often results in the loss of existing connections and knowledge
- Limited CCL options for elementary and middle schools
- Limited CCL options in rural areas
- Financial constraints on purchasing equipment and gear, running programs, and travel costs for students
- Few businesses are willing to host students younger than 16
- Lack of support and direction for educators from school administrations



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Career-connected Learning is for All Ages

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

What do students identify as barriers to participate in career-connected learning activities?

- Travel distance, conditions, and costs
- Limited opportunities and resources in rural areas

“Since we are a small school, we only have two opportunities available to us. Please let us have more opportunities.”

- Coursework, extracurricular activities, and family responsibilities already consume much of student's time
- Mental hurdles
 - Self-doubt
 - Depression
 - Fear of failure or falling behind
 - Uncertainty in options

Student feedback to schools and businesses providing CCL opportunities

- More hands-on opportunities like job shadows and internships
- More integration of career knowledge and needs in classwork
- Monetary assistance with travel and supplies
- Be honest and straightforward with students

“Be straight with students, do not sugar coat the career and what it entails.”

- Treat the students as adults and give them a chance to grow and learn



Educator ideas to strengthen career-connected learning (CCL)

- **More professional development and support for educators**
 - Guidance in integrating CCL-related and project-based learning into curriculums and lesson plans
- **Grants or other financial assistance for student travel and expenses**

“Teachers need more training/comfort with integrating career concepts into earlier coursework.”



The Montana Work-based Learning Collaborative (WBLC) is a cross-section of public and private sector organizations working to improve, enhance, and expand work-based learning in Montana.

The educator information was collected via a survey of over 150 Montana K-12 educators from Fall 2023 - Fall 2025. The student information was collected via small focus groups facilitated by WBLC members; over 800 Montana high school students participated from Fall 2022 - Spring 2026. Data was collected from all school sizes and from rural, tribal, and urban areas.

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- **Assistance facilitating connections to employers**
 - A directory of employers interested in providing CCL opportunities
 - Liaisons between schools and employers either provided by the state or funding assistance for local liaisons
- **Supports for rural, small, and/or remote schools**
 - Assistance with funding
 - Assistance with coordinating activities
 - Remote CCL opportunities
- **Diversify experiences when few opportunities exist nearby**
- **Provide both quick start and step-by-step guides for K-12 educators to assist students with getting started in CCL activities**
- **Have consistent CCL program standards and requirements across the state**
- **Have students give presentations on their CCL experiences to build peer awareness and interest**
- **Build better connections between schools**



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