

This We Believe About Work-Based Learning

BY THE POLICIES COMMISSION FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION

At the same time that our society mandates that students perform at minimum academic standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies, schools are under fire for students not meeting those standards. Likewise, many students are unable to transfer and apply what they learned to workplace settings. Traditional classroom environments are not always the best way to engage students. These isolated settings may help students learn content but do not always contribute to the development of decision-making, problem-solving, and other higher-order thinking skills needed for further education, employer-based learning programs, and lifelong learning. Education is at a crossroads. Many of its well-intentioned attempts to raise standards fail students who are unable or unmotivated to learn in traditional settings. Such students may benefit from work-based learning (WBL) as they apply what they learn to the world around them, explore careers, and identify future educational opportunities.

What is Work-Based Learning?

Work-based learning is the deliberate use of the workplace for the engagement of students with in-school resources (i.e.

case studies and simulations) and/or out-of-school learning experiences. WBL experiences are formal, structured, and measurable, involving the collaborative efforts of mentors in the workplace, instructional staff, administrators, students, and parents. WBL links what students are learning in the classroom with what they are experiencing in the workplace. Examples of WBL include career awareness programs; cases and simulations, whereby students solve work-related problems in the classroom; paid and non-paid work experiences, such as school-based enterprises and service learning; and after-school job placements, internships, and cooperative education. WBL initiatives support both the academic and societal goals of education.

Why is Work-Based Learning Important?

Schools are communities of learners. The goal of a learning community is to provide learning support for all its members. In some instances, what students need to know and be able to do is best taught in subject-centered classrooms. WBL challenges students to integrate and transfer what they have learned from their school communities to the workplace. Simulated work

environments or placements in actual work settings enable students to cross boundaries between communities of learners and communities of practice.

Classroom learning makes WBL meaningful, and WBL makes classroom instruction relevant. To transfer learning to communities outside the school, students need experiences structured around work-based practices. The structure includes designing an appropriate learning environment (such as working in a school store, job shadowing, internships), providing support and appropriate instruction to ensure success, and guiding students in reflecting on their experiences and evaluating their own performance.

We believe that business educators can help students cross the boundaries between their school-based community of learners and work-based communities of practice. Students find meaning in what they have learned as these communities intersect.

What are the Benefits of Work-Based Learning?

The benefits of WBL apply particularly to secondary, postsecondary, and college/university levels of education. Specifically, WBL

- builds partnerships between schools and other communities
- integrates curricular and co-curricular areas of education
- reinforces academic learning and deepens understanding of subject matter
- enhances career decision making
- advances interpersonal and intrapersonal capabilities
- engages students in new ways of thinking not found in classroom environments
- encourages students to continue their education by showing relevance of academic and occupational instruction

What are the Challenges to Work-Based Learning?

Despite the many benefits of WBL, challenges exist to the acceptance and implementation of work-based programs. These challenges come from a variety of stakeholders: employers, administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

Employer recruitment poses a challenge. Employers may be reluctant to spend the time and resources required to create meaningful work-based experiences. School administrators faced with the pressures of standardized tests, budget constraints, and graduation requirements may perceive WBL as not supporting these accountability mandates. Teachers need professional preparation, workplace experience, time, sufficient resources, and commitment if they are to conceptualize, develop, and coordinate WBL programs. Engaging students in meaningful WBL experiences and measuring learning outcomes are difficult tasks for educators. **We believe that** business education teacher education programs must prepare teachers for this specialized WBL teacher/coordinator role.

Students have difficulty participating in WBL because they, too, are under enormous pressures and time constraints. Graduation requirements and outside interests compete for their time. Parents of students at the secondary level want their children to succeed academically; they may perceive WBL programs as not supporting college-bound goals. **We believe that** the perception of WBL

must be enhanced, with business educators demonstrating and promoting the value of WBL to the community at large. WBL is a viable learning experience for the work-bound and/or college-bound student. WBL experiences help students learn about business and industry and help them plan for and participate in further education and/or employer-sponsored learning programs.

What Is the Role of the Business Educator in Work-Based Learning?

The business educator as a change agent works with other stakeholders to ensure that all instruction is effective in preparing students for communities outside the classroom. **We believe that** business educators are in a unique position to take the lead in establishing WBL experiences because of their business expertise, educational background, and ties to the business community.

For business educators to succeed as change agents, support must come from appropriate stakeholder groups (i.e. state department of education staff, local administrators, university teacher educators, cooperating business partners). To ensure acceptance of WBL, all stakeholders should work collaboratively to document and disseminate examples of best WBL practices.

We believe that WBL is a viable educational reform strategy to enhance learning through related work experiences. Business educators can use WBL to bring school and business communities together to prepare students for civic and economic engagement in an unpredictable world!