

Giving All Students Access to Workplace-Based Learning

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Expanding workplace-based learning (WBL) is rightly becoming a priority for school districts and charter schools across the country. Nothing makes academic subject matter more relevant and compelling than its application in the real world.

In Louisiana, for example, where I serve as Assistant Superintendent of the Department of Education, our [Jump Start](#) career and technical education program gives high school students unprecedented access to WBL opportunities, including the chance to work with what we call "unfamiliar workplace adults."

"Unfamiliar workplace adults" perfectly describes the people that today's high school students must learn to constructively engage when they leave high school for college, career or both. Whether their studies concentrated on chemistry or culinary arts, electrician certification or English composition, all young adults must learn to develop and manage relationships with unfamiliar workplace adults.

Unfortunately, too many students don't have access to WBL in high school. WPL sites (i.e., workplaces full of unfamiliar workplace adults) is not an evenly distributed resource. Algebra II or American History can be taught everywhere. But not every community has access to a local workplace with chemists, cartoonists or coders.

Although no one intends it, the uneven distribution of workplace learning opportunities means we're leaving students who live in rural or inner city communities without access to diverse local businesses. We're overlooking students who attend alternative school programs that don't allow students to participate in off-campus programs. And we're not addressing students with disabilities who don't find it manageable to participate in many WBL programs.

The result is that today's focus on WBL often results in the "rich getting richer" syndrome. Schools expand the depth and quality of options for students who already have access to WBL, while students without access to WBL continue to be horribly under-served.

In Louisiana we've tried to address this challenge by using the online [Nepri](#) system, industry partners such as the Baton Rouge Area Chamber's [Micro-Enterprise Credential initiative](#), and [Virtual Workplace Experience](#) instructional resources to create a process we call "micro-industry engagement."

Micro-industry engagement is a series of cumulatively structured exercises that enables students to master increasingly sophisticated workplace skills while learning about the true universe of career opportunities available to them.

Micro-industry engagement enables *all* students to engage with workplace experts in every industry sector they want to explore, making sure a student's future is not limited by his / her town (parish or school district) boundary or personal circumstances.

Importantly, micro-industry engagement doesn't replace standard onsite WBL options. Schools with robust WBL programs can adopt micro-industry engagement efforts to put students in touch with workplace experts in industries that are not represented locally, or to help overcome other obstacles to access.

Because students in Houma, Natchitoches and Pointe Coupee who want to learn about animation, mountain climbing, and space exploration should have the same chance to do exactly that as students in Burbank, Boulder, and Houston. The same is true for all students, everywhere.