COLLEGE & WORKFORCE READINESS

Give Students Meaningful, Work-Oriented Learning, U.S. Executives Say

By Jennifer Vilcarino — December 05, 2025 9 min read

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Schools are making moves to provide more Career and Technical Education courses that offer work-oriented learning experiences as student demand for those opportunities continues to rise.

A recent EdWeek Research Center survey found that 75% of teachers, principals, and district leaders said their schools or districts plan to offer more work-based learning and internship opportunities in the next five years.

But one big challenge for schools will be to establish meaningful, work-oriented learning experiences that help students develop skills that are transferable across almost any field. What should that look like? And how can schools make it happen in and outside of classrooms?

To address those types of questions, Education Week reached out to senior executives of American companies from a variety of industries. We asked them: *What types of career learning experiences for K-12 students in school and actual workplaces do you think would help?*

(In a related question, we asked senior executives from those companies to identify the specific skills students need to develop while they are in school to succeed later when they enter the workforce. See the responses to that question here.)

The following are the responses to the work-oriented learning experiences question. They have been edited for length and clarity.

> **Bryan Quick** Director of Talent Acquisition at Abbott, a global health care company

Bryan Quick

There's no replacement for hands-on learning or the chance to obtain advice, training, and knowledge from those doing the work on a daily basis, whether they're in the lab, the office, or out in the field. Offering high school students the chance to see how a company operates, what a workday looks like, and what different jobs entail can open their eyes to a wide array of careers and pathways to success. It helps them envision the future. Internships like the ones Abbott offers also provide students with an awareness of the skills and experiences required for certain jobs. And by providing students with on-the-job experiences alongside seasoned professionals, they can obtain a greater understanding of what they'll need to succeed in the future in a much different way than they ever could in the classroom.

> **Brandee McHale** Head of Community Investing and Development at Citi and President of the Citi Foundation

Brandee McHale

Technical and vocational training, work-based learning, digital literacy up-skilling and financial education are all key to unlocking opportunity for younger workers. That's why Citi colleagues dedicate their time and talents year-round to providing financial education programming to K-12 students. Furthermore, through the Citi Foundation's 2025 Global Innovation Challenge, we are supporting many nonprofits in their efforts to deliver these kinds of experiences. For example, by equipping young adults from low-income communities in California and New York with AI training, professional development, and social support, one grantee is helping increase access to high-quality technology careers and economic mobility. Another is helping youth in Puerto Rico gain access to careers in the aerospace industry by connecting them to technical trainings and employers, as well as providing job placement assistance, mentorship, and access to continued education. With hands-on experiences like these, combined with access to trainings, networks, and mentors, I am confident that we can help close skills gaps and support resilient economic futures for the next generation.

> **Laura Slover** Managing Director of Skills for the Future at ETS, a global education and talent solutions organization

Laura Slover

To close the growing gap in workplace readiness, we need to rethink high school offerings. Experiences that center around solving real-world problems encourage students to ask, "What is the problem and what do I need to know to solve it?" That mindset builds curiosity, technical knowledge, critical thinking, and adaptability. Community-based learning and apprenticeships also give students direct exposure to professional environments, while innovative programs like Big Picture Learning and High Tech High show how personalized, project-driven education can foster collaboration and resilience. And equally importantly, we need to create space for failure. Learning happens when things don't go as planned—that's where creativity, grit, and growth truly emerge. Shifting assessment approaches in K–12 and using tools like the Mastery Transcript provide students the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and build bodies of evidence about their capabilities. One of the most critical skills for the future will be the ability to keep adapting and developing over the course of one's life. Learning is a journey.

Melonia da Gama Director of Training Programs at Fortinet, a cybersecurity company

Melonia da Gama

For students in high school, introducing technical courses and fundamental certifications is beneficial to prepare for post-secondary education programs and higher-level technical certifications to supplement degrees and diplomas. Additionally, it is essential for students to develop personal competencies and workplace-readiness skills to be fully prepared for a career as a cybersecurity professional. These competencies—such as collaboration, critical thinking, and communication—can start being developed at an early age and grow into essential tools in the workplace.

That is what we need right now: more interest in a career within cybersecurity. Research shows that the global cyber workforce is short by more than 4.7 million professionals. Providing students with hands-on experience in "capture the flag" cybersecurity competitions, internships, training sessions with seasoned professionals, certification programs, and age-appropriate resources are important tactics to drive more interest in the field. Coordinating guest lecturers or arranging field trips to local technology companies or cybersecurity training facilities could help drive interest in the industry and ultimately prepare interested students for rewarding careers in cybersecurity or information technology.

Maureen Heymans Vice President of Learning and General Manager for LearnX at Google

Maureen Heymans

To help prepare young students for the future world of work, we need to design active learning experiences. This means moving away from the arm's length approach of shadowing someone toward hands-on experiences that can teach K-12 students how to solve problems, interact more effectively with technology like AI, and build something from scratch. Here are three types of learning experiences that can help:

Vibecoding [a practice that uses natural language to prompt AI]: Students take a passion project and turn it into something tangible. Think football, gaming, or baking, where instead of a blank canvas, they could vibe-code interactive versions to create a fitness tracker, a retro version of a game, or a recipe app. This helps them build knowledge of AI technologies, [and understand] their strengths and weaknesses.

Structured AI Co-Creation and Critique Sprints: These sprints could tackle real-world problems and teach AI literacy skills. First, brainstorm alone without AI. Then use AI like Gemini to expand and refine those ideas. The most crucial step is critically evaluating the AI's output, identifying any biases or ethical blind spots. This teaches students to treat AI as a brainstorming partner and not a replacement for original thought.

The NotebookLMResearch & Synthesis Challenge: Give a team a messy folder of conflicting reports and data. Their mission [is to] use a tool like NotebookLM to make sense of the chaos. They must find the contradictions, synthesize key arguments, and propose a path forward. This simulates the high-level research and critical thinking required in a job like engineering and moves them from passive consumers to active explorers, helping them manage cognitive load and manage multiple perspectives—a vital skill in today's workplace.

Lydia Logan Vice President of Education and Workforce

Development at IBM

Closing these gaps requires connecting learning with real-world experience. Education and industry must collaborate to give students early, authentic exposure to workplaces and emerging fields.

By equipping educators and community partners to guide students toward in-demand skills—and fostering partnerships across business, higher education, and workforce systems—we can build a more resilient, future-ready talent pipeline.

> **Dave Zasada** Vice President of Education and Corporate Responsibility at Intuit, a global financial technology platform

Dave Zasada

Since launching in 2023, nearly 4 million students across the United States have interacted with Intuit for Education's free financial literacy curriculum. Over the course of that time, we've seen the importance of combining real-life training with virtual and classroom-based learning, and have launched several initiatives to help fill those gaps and meet students where they are, including the Intuit for Education Food Truck Program.

The Food Truck Program equips underserved and underrepresented Career and Technical Education (CTE) high school students with everything they need to run their own food truck—from financial and business management tools to culinary training and startup grants. Throughout the program, students learn everything from entrepreneurial finance and point-of-sale systems to designing a menu and sourcing food locally and seasonally. This free, work-based technical and entrepreneurial program provides school districts with fully operational food trucks, equipped with commercial-grade kitchens, and a curriculum to teach high school students how to operate a business using Intuit's financial tools, like an internship on wheels. The program has now had close to 10,000 students participate, and is currently active at schools in Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Nashville, Nevada, San Diego, and other places.

By combining classroom learning with true on-the-job experience, we can transform financial literacy from a passive learning experience into an active, engaging journey that immerses students in real-world simulations that mirror everyday financial decisions. That way, students don't just learn about personal finance; they practice it and bring those lessons with them into the real world.

> **Duwain Pinder** Partner at McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm

Duwain Pinder

Our research suggests a link between Career and Technical Education (CTE) and performance. High school students who take CTE courses have higher graduation rates and greater employability, especially students from low-income backgrounds, than those who do not. To accomplish this, we see an opportunity for industries and schools to collaborate more closely to reimagine career-connected learning and adopt evidence-based models to design more effective programs. Youth apprenticeships and dual-enrollment programs also offer students an opportunity to gain hands-on experience outside of traditional learning models, enabling a more rounded education and a broader resume of experiences.

> **Deirdre Quarnstrom** Vice President of Education at Microsoft

Real-world experience is essential. Integrating AI into the classroom with guidance from educators is helping provide students with digital and creative problem-solving skills that will help them thrive in future careers.

Dierdre Quarnstrom

But it starts with building strong fundamentals and providing access to age-appropriate experiences. For example, Reading Coach, part of Microsoft's Learning Accelerators, helps students strengthen literacy and reading skills through personalized practice and feedback. These tools—along with others focused on math and critical thinking—create a foundation for more advanced technologies and ensure students are confident learners. We also see enthusiasm for AI literacy in Minecraft Education and Hour of AI, where learners of all ages explore how AI works, practice digital literacy, and reflect on safe and responsible use through hands-on activities.

That kind of early exposure is very beneficial. When students can experiment with the same AI tools in the classroom that professionals use in the workplace, they start building both technical understanding and confidence.

In short, if we give K–12 students opportunities to use AI responsibly in school, we're essentially giving them a head start on skills that today's workplaces demand. It's about turning classroom experiences into a springboard for the next generation of creators, inventors, and leaders.

Jennifer Vilcarino

Digital News Reporter, Education Week

Jennifer Vilcarino is a digital news reporter for Education Week.