

Aligning Learning With Local Careers

The purpose of this *Aligning Learning With Local Careers* discussion guide is to help Iowa educators talk with local businesses about the skills and credentials they are looking for when hiring. It is designed to help school teams have focused conversations with businesses about their entry-level jobs and industry certification requirements to inform how high school students can build skills, earn relevant credentials, and gain real-world experience aligned with those opportunities. The guide offers simple planning steps, suggested discussion questions, and guidance for follow-up to help schools and employers explore partnership opportunities at a pace that works for both sides.

Who Should Use This Guide

This guide is intended for

- school and district leaders,
- career and technical education or work-based learning coordinators,
- counselors, teachers, and career advisors, and
- staff responsible for employer or community partnerships.

Step 1: Identify key school and employer stakeholders.

Workforce and community organizations can help schools understand local workforce challenges and opportunities, identify local employers, and make introductions to business leaders. Here are examples of workforce and community organizations that can help make connections to employers:

- local economic development organizations
- industry or trade associations
- local or regional [chambers of commerce](#)
- [workforce development boards or staff](#)
- employers involved in [registered apprenticeships](#)

Step 2: Identify 1-3 organizations and conduct outreach.

Select 1-3 organizations or employers to contact via email or phone, based on the connections identified by key school or employer stakeholders in Step 1.

Before setting up a meeting with an employer, educators should take time to prepare for the initial outreach to ensure that it is focused, confident, and respectful of the employer's time. Before reaching out to set up a conversation, educators should do the following:

- Conduct background research on the employers with whom they would like to meet.
 - Is information available on their hiring trends and job requirements?
 - Have they been involved in partnerships with the school before and, if so, in what ways?
- Familiarize themselves with the school's career pathways, courses, or programs that might already be aligned to workforce skills and credentials.
- Be ready to explain why they are reaching out and what they are hoping to learn or explore.
- Be ready to describe their student population (e.g., common student interests, grade levels, readiness).

Key Message for Employers

Educators should emphasize the following in their outreach:

- This type of alignment can help build a future talent pipeline.
- It would be helpful to have ongoing communication to ensure continued alignment.

Step 3: Meet with the organization to understand their workforce needs, priorities, and constraints.

This discussion is designed to help schools and employers understand employer needs, priorities, and constraints after having conducted background research and preparing for the meeting, as outlined in Step 2.

The following agenda is structured for a 45- to 60-minute meeting, but it can be adapted based on the relationship, available time, and employer interest. By the end of the discussion, participants should have

- a clearer understanding of the employer's workforce needs, priorities, and constraints, and
- clarity on whether there is alignment worth exploring further (e.g., opportunities to adjust day-to-day instruction, assignments, or credentialing pathways to align with the employer's expected skills and needs), and potential next steps (if appropriate).

Meeting agenda and activities	Notes for discussion
Welcome and introductions (5 minutes) • Brief introductions of all participants • Clarification of roles and connection to the school or business • Overview of conversation goals (see suggested framing)	Suggested framing: “Today’s conversation is about learning more about your organization and sharing how alignment of skills and credentials support both students and employers. We’re not here to pitch a specific program; this is really about understanding your priorities and exploring whether there are opportunities for alignment to help ensure you get the skilled talent you need and ensure our students are positioned for opportunities with your company. Facilitator tip: Reinforce that the conversation is flexible and can shift based on what is most useful to the employer.
Overview of the school and students (5–10 minutes) • Brief description of the school and student population • Existing career, career and technical education, or work-based learning activities (if any) • Why the school is interested in employer partnerships	Key message: The school is seeking relevant and realistic experiences, not burdensome arrangements. Contextualization and localization are key.

Meeting agenda and activities	Notes for discussion
Employer perspective and workforce needs (10–15 minutes) • Can you tell us about your business and the types of roles you typically hire for? • Are there positions that are hard to fill or that have high turnover? • How do you currently connect with young people or future workers (if applicable)? • What skills are required in your industry/business? Examples might include critical thinking, reading comprehension, time management, data literacy and interpretation, public speaking, and computer and technological literacy. • What activities would you encourage students to participate in to align with the skills and attributes in your industry or business? Optional follow-up questions (if time allows) • Are there industry certifications, tools, or software that students should be exposed to? • Have you partnered with schools before? What worked or didn't work?	Facilitator tip: Reinforce understanding by connecting the employer's ideas to examples or insights from the background research.

Meeting agenda and activities	Notes for discussion
Exploring potential partnership opportunities (10–15 minutes) - Based on what you’ve shared about your workforce needs, where do you see the strongest opportunities for students to build relevant skills or gain exposure to your industry? Attendance and scheduling considerations - For students who may be working, how could scheduling be structured to support their success in school (e.g., avoiding shifts during the school day or coordinating around key academic times)? - Are there ways your organization currently supports—or could support—students in prioritizing school attendance while gaining work experience? Optional probing questions - Would your business be open to helping our school understand your evolving skill needs? - What would make participating in a school–business partnership feasible for your organization?	Facilitator tip: Normalize hesitations. Let employers know that saying “not now” or “only something small” is okay.
Closing and next steps (5 minutes) - Summarize the discussion. - Identify any immediate follow-up actions. - Thank the employer for their time and insights. - Send a thank you and a summary of the meeting, plus any next steps, by email.	

Step 4: Use what you learned to strengthen day-to-day instruction.

When students understand how their learning relates to their goals and future possibilities, they are more likely to attend school and engage in learning. To make these experiences more meaningful for students, here are a few ideas:

- **Update classroom examples and assignments.** If the employer emphasized specific tools, processes, or expectations (e.g., teamwork, attendance, safety), build them into activities and rubrics and be clear with students about those connections.
- **Adjust skill focus.** Help students see how the technical and employability skills they build across courses—like communication, reliability, and problem solving—align with local entry-level job expectations.
- **Validate credentials and pathways.** Confirm whether current credentials or course sequences align with employer needs; identify gaps to explore with your team. Follow up with the employer to confirm next steps if avenues for student participation in apprenticeships or other potential partnership opportunities surfaced during your discussion.

Additional Resources on Work-Based Learning

Iowa Department of Education (IDE)-Specific Links and Resources

- [Career-Connected Learning landing page](#) (IDE)
- [Iowa Clearinghouse for Work-based Learning](#) (IDE)—database of career-connected and work-based learning opportunities for students
- [Iowa Industry-Recognized Credentials landing page](#) (IDE)
- [Sustained Project-Based Learning in Partnership with an Employer Toolkit](#) (IDE)
- [Integrating CTSO Competitive Events into Work-Based Learning: A Toolkit for School Districts](#) (IDE)
- [Iowa Career Pathways](#) (IDE)
- [Iowa Work Based Learning Coordinators](#) (affiliate of Iowa Association of Colleges for Teacher Education)
- [Iowa Work-based Learning website](#) (Iowa Workforce Development)
 - [Work-Based Learning Funding Opportunities](#)
- [Iowa Local Workforce Development Areas](#)—Identify the organization that guides workforce development activities in your community.

National Work Based Learning Toolkits and Resources

- [ACTE Taking Business to School: A Resource Guide for Building an Employer Partner Engagement Plan](#)
- [CTE Work-Based Learning Tool Kit](#)
- [Work-and-Learn in Action: Successful Strategies for Employers](#)