

Leveraging Intermediaries to Advance Work-Based Learning: Lessons From a Case Study of Indiana

By Stephanie Veck and Samia Amin



Across the United States, work-based learning (WBL) is gaining momentum as a strategy for ensuring our education systems are responsive to employer needs and capable of connecting youth with economic opportunity. Although many states and regions are investing in WBL, most efforts remain fragmented and limited in scale. Schools are already stretched in delivering their core mission, and employers often lack the time and capacity to coordinate WBL opportunities. As a result, WBL can become everyone's priority but no one's clear responsibility, leaving relatively few eligible students able to participate in meaningful WBL experiences. In practice, this creates access gaps both for students, when there are not enough high-quality opportunities available to meet demand, and for employers, when they lack the support needed to successfully host and sustain WBL experiences.

Funders and policymakers are eager to understand how to move from promising WBL pilots to systems that consistently deliver high-quality experiences at scale. As part of building evidence on what works, we scanned efforts across the country regarding intermediaries and WBL. One example is the state of Indiana, where state leaders are using ambitious policy goals and intermediary infrastructure to expand access to high-quality WBL earlier in students' academic journeys through K–12 education. This raises a critical question for the field: **How do states translate bold WBL visions into coordinated, high-quality implementation at scale?**

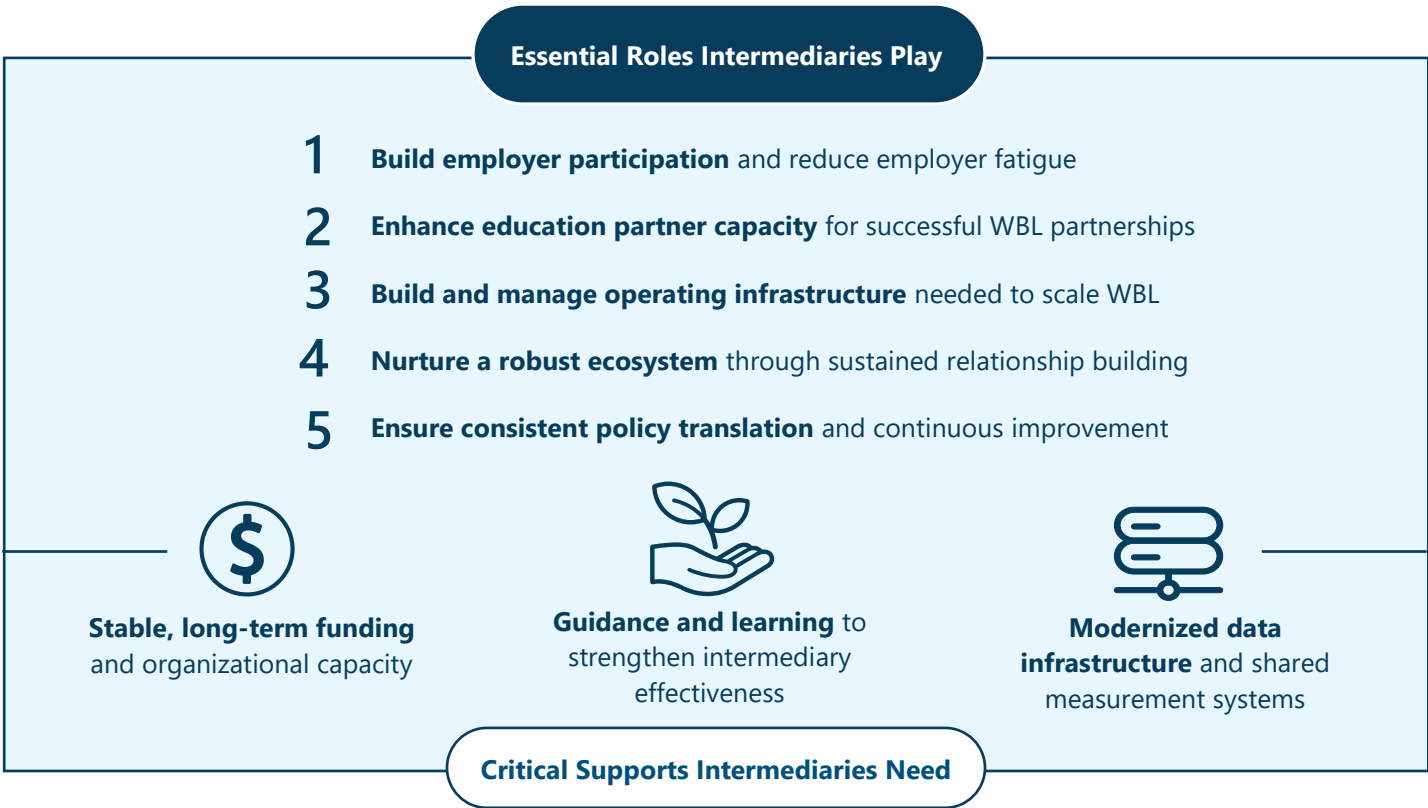
This case study examines how Indiana is operationalizing that vision, particularly the [role intermediaries play](#) in bridging policy and practice, building capacity across partners, and enabling the system conditions highlighted in our recommendations.

We consider a youth work-based learning intermediary to be a regional organization that serves as an operational connector between employers and schools by developing, coordinating, enabling, and sustaining high-quality WBL experiences at scale.

Case Study Snapshot

We leveraged a literature scan and interviews with 17 different organizations in Indiana, where the State Board of Education has set ambitious goals for expanding access to high-quality WBL, embedding it within the state's graduation framework and exploring how intermediaries fit into the strategy for scale. Although the literature suggests intermediaries vary widely in the roles and functions they play, conversations with intermediaries surfaced insights about which functions are especially important to get right and what support is most needed for success. Exhibit 1 displays a snapshot of the five roles and three supports that our research found to be most critical for intermediaries.

Exhibit 1. Unlocking Scale in Work-Based Learning: Five Essential Intermediary Roles and Three Critical Supports for Success



For other states and funders eager to leverage intermediaries, we present this case study that describes in more detail these critical roles intermediaries must play for WBL success, what quality looks like for those roles, and what supports intermediaries need to be positioned to drive WBL scale-up at a pace that matches policy intent. Our hope is that early documentation of lessons learned from a state taking bold action to expand youth pathways into meaningful work can help inform the additional efforts, thereby accelerating our progress and how well we serve the next generation.

Next, we will share what we learned through our literature scan and why we selected Indiana for this case study. Then we will dig into each of the five roles and our recommendations for the critical support intermediaries need to play a meaningful role in scaling WBL for youth.

Why Study the Role of K–12 WBL Intermediaries in Indiana

What the Literature Tells Us

Intermediaries play a key role in translating expectations across systems, supporting program design and delivery, and reducing complexity for partners through practical tools, guidance, and administrative support (Advance CTE, 2016; Education First, 2022; Elvery et al., 2016; Hartung et al., 2020; Ratway et al., 2018; Strada Education Foundation, 2026).

Intermediaries in WBL and broader college and career pathways efforts are commonly framed as the coordinating organizations or “glue” that hold an education-to-work ecosystem together (Hartung et al., 2020). Intermediaries are also framed as responses to coordination problems between employers, training providers, and job seekers. Four features make intermediary contributions critical:

- **The need for “dual customer” approaches** that advance both employer and learner prosperity (Andreason, 2016; Maguire et al., 2010; Marschall, 2021; Schrock, 2013)
- **Fragmentation** between education and workforce systems (Braxton & Roach, 2023)
- **Resource scarcity** experienced by public agencies and employers that amplifies the need for third parties to reduce burden to scale (Education Strategy Group & Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, 2019)
- **Resource braiding** needed for students with complex barriers to WBL participation (Braxton & Roach, 2023)

Exhibit 2. Recent and Upcoming Resources on Intermediary Roles of Interest to the Field

- Strada’s [Scaling Work-Based Learning: A Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries](#)
- Lumina’s [Bridge Builders: How Intermediaries Can Connect Education and Work in a Postpandemic World](#),
- [Mending the Path: The Central Role of Intermediaries in Building Equitable Pathways From Education to Work](#)
- AIR is currently conducting a cost study on WBL Intermediaries in Indiana to better understand the resources required for WBL intermediaries to perform the core functions that enable high-quality WBL at scale. A final report will be published by October 2027.

The Case for Indiana

Over the last decade, Indiana has emerged as a national leader in the use of WBL as a college and career readiness strategy. The new Indiana diploma, approved in 2024, is effective for all students, beginning with the freshman [class](#) in 2025–26 (class of 2029) and includes readiness seals that offer connected pathways aligned with their future college and career goals. Through diploma redesign, statewide definitions of high-quality career-connected learning, and exploration of intermediary infrastructure, Indiana is tackling a most ambitious effort to embed work-based learning into the secondary education experience. This combination of policy, implementation support, and cross-sector coordination makes Indiana a valuable case for understanding how states can move from isolated programs to coordinated systems through the following levers:

- **Using state policy to expand WBL:** The Indiana State Board of Education (SBOE) used state policy to **expand access to high-quality WBL**. SBOE established Graduation Pathways in 2017, enabling students to demonstrate postsecondary readiness through multiple pathways aligned to their goals, with WBL as a central mechanism for demonstrating employability skills. Through legislation in 2024, Indiana further redesigned high school diploma requirements following an inclusive [graduation landscape analysis](#), and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) issued new guidance on its implementation in January 2025. IDOE collaborated with the Indiana Commission for Higher Education—with input from state agencies, employers, and other stakeholders—to inform the development of Indiana’s diploma redesign, including diploma seals and embedded WBL requirements.
- **Ambitious goal setting for scale and quality:** [Indiana defined WBL and what counts as state-approved WBL in an effort to ensure that scale does not come at the expense of rigor or consistency](#). State leaders explicitly defined expectations for the types of experiences that qualify as WBL, specifying [11 career-connected learning experiences](#) that count. WBL is not required for all students, but it is embedded in three of the six diploma seals signaling college and career readiness, requiring [substantive hours of WBL](#).
- **Sustained investment in statewide infrastructure, especially intermediaries:** Philanthropic leaders in Indiana have invested in growing intermediary capacity, as the state increasingly relies on intermediary organizations to coordinate partnerships, engage employers, support program design, and address regional gaps in capacity and implementation. This investment is reflected in regional youth apprenticeship pilots, the expansion of intermediary-led programs, and collaboration with Ascend Indiana to build statewide coordination structures,



like the Intermediary Learning Network and Regional Work-Based Learning Resource Hub, to support more consistent, effective delivery. Ascend Indiana and the network of intermediaries help schools and employers across the state understand new WBL policies and build the partnerships needed to implement WBL.

- **Leveraging unique partnerships between philanthropy, nonprofits, and government:** Indiana leveraged cross-sector partnerships to align funding and create enabling conditions for systemic reform. Indiana benefits from an unusually influential and place-based philanthropic ecosystem, anchored by a small number of large foundations and a strong network of community foundations. This network has supported coordinated investment in intermediary infrastructure and system alignment over the years (see Exhibit 3). Combined with a deliberate focus on building regional intermediaries and statewide communities of practice, these investments have accelerated shared learning and system coherence.

Taken together, Indiana represents a critical inflection point: a state with strong policy demand and emerging infrastructure but where the systems required to scale high-quality WBL are still developing. This makes it a uniquely valuable site to study both the promise and practical challenges of intermediary-driven systems.

Exhibit 3. Examples of Government and Philanthropic Support of WBL in Indiana

These investments illustrate how government and philanthropy have supported system building and intermediary capacity in Indiana:

- The launch of Ascend Indiana in 2016 with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc., the Joyce Foundation, the Central Indiana Community Foundation, and the Glick Family Foundation to serve as a cross-sector, industry-led organization to collaborate with businesses, state agencies, and regional partners to develop talent pipelines and coordinate efforts across organizations.
- Lilly Endowment Inc. continues to support Ascend Indiana and invests in [strengthening youth programs across the state](#).
- To implement the Career Coaching Framework, the Indiana [Commission for Higher Education](#) awarded \$25 million in [Career Coaching Grants to 28 intermediaries](#) to support statewide career coaching and navigation infrastructure, which complements but is distinct from the WBL intermediary functions described in this paper.
- In 2021, [Ascend Indiana, in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship at New America](#), awarded \$115,000 to several regional intermediaries to advance scalable regional youth apprenticeship systems in partnership with local partners and state-level agencies.
- [The Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation](#) awarded \$1.2 million to help build infrastructure that uses state-level industry associations and regionally located intermediaries as liaisons between employers, industry talent associations, schools, and students for Indiana Career Apprenticeships.

Critical Intermediary Roles to Advance WBL in Indiana

There is strong interest among an increasing number of states to proactively scale WBL through state policy and by leveraging intermediaries. Our case study presents insights from the perspective of 15 intermediaries, and two state-level entities we interviewed that are advancing WBL in Indiana. Interviews uncovered the critical roles intermediaries

Case study participation included interviews of 36 individuals across 17 organizations in Indiana, between January and April 2026.

fill and support most needed for success. We supplemented what we heard from intermediary interviews with insights from interviews with a state official, leadership of Ascend Indiana, which is coordinating the [Intermediary Learning Network \(ILN\)](#) and [Regional WBL Resource Hub](#), and through observation of and conversations during the in-person convening of Indiana regional intermediaries at the launch of the ILN.

Typically, an intermediary is a single organization that is fulfilling all the roles as described on the following pages. It is feasible that through intentional coordination and strong organizational relationships, multiple organizations can collectively serve as a regional intermediary. The elements required for a multiorganizational intermediary to function well include trust, communication, and clear responsibilities and expectations as well as mutual respect from the region's schools, employers, and other ecosystem partners.

Throughout this section we use **case study examples** to illustrate how these roles are carried out in practice, highlighting the approaches and contributions of specific intermediaries.



Case Study Example: EIW and ECESC, Eastern IN

[Eastern Indiana Works \(EIW\)](#) and the [East Central Educational Service Center \(ECESC\)](#) demonstrate how intermediary functions can be distributed across organizations rather than housed in a single entity. Across a region spanning 16 counties, 52 districts, and more than 100 schools, the two organizations bring distinct but complementary strengths. EIW serves as an employer-facing intermediary, building relationships with businesses, translating workforce needs into WBL opportunities, and coordinating with workforce and economic development partners. ECESC serves as the school-facing intermediary, helping districts interpret and implement WBL strategies, convening practitioners, and creating peer-learning networks across schools.

The partnership works because each organization focuses on the audiences and systems it knows best. EIW brings workforce expertise and employer trust, and ECESC brings deep relationships with educators and an understanding of school needs and constraints. Regular coordination among regional partners and ongoing collaboration between staff help align employers, schools, and workforce partners around shared goals. Together, EIW and ECESC function as a coordinated intermediary system that bridges education and industry, allowing each organization to specialize while ensuring WBL opportunities are consistently developed, supported, and scaled across the region.

Role 1: Build employer participation and reduce employer fatigue.

Scaling high-quality WBL depends on sustained employer participation—both expanding the number of employers engaged and deepening the opportunities they offer. Intermediaries play a central role in bringing employers into the system and maintaining their participation over time. This role focuses on expanding employer participation and reducing friction, not on managing individual placements (see Role 3).

Why is this needed? Across the country and in Indiana specifically, there is a push to expand WBL, driven in part by federal and state policies, such as [America's Talent Strategy](#), that are increasing expectations and a need for employer participation at scale. Across our interviews, we consistently heard that although employers are increasingly engaged, employer participation is constrained by three persistent barriers: (a) **fragmented outreach and competing requests** of employers from multiple organizations; (b) **operational burden and uncertainty** of hosting students that requires time, supervision, and understanding of program requirements; and (c) **limited perception of value**. Many employers still view WBL as a social good rather than a core talent strategy. Intermediaries help by simplifying engagement and reducing burden.

What does excellence look like? Interviews revealed that excellence entails performing the following activities well: **serving as a “single front door”** that aligns outreach to employers to simplify engagement and eliminate duplication; **providing clear participation pathways** aligned to employer capacity and readiness; **delivering onboarding, support, and troubleshooting** to reduce burden and increase positive experiences; **building and sustaining relationships**, prioritizing retention over one-time engagement; and **shifting employer mindset toward WBL** as a talent pipeline strategy.

What breaks when intermediaries are under resourced? Employers become overburdened by uncoordinated outreach from multiple organizations, leading to frustration and disengagement. Confusion persists around WBL expectations and definitions, making it difficult for employers to clearly understand how to participate. As a result, employer fatigue rises, participation declines, and opportunities remain limited and concentrated among a small set of repeat partners.



Case Study Example: ROI, Southern IN

Regional Opportunity Initiative (ROI) builds employer participation by meeting businesses where they are. ROI developed a continuum of WBL options for employers that allows each employer to engage at a level aligned to their capacity and readiness. To reduce employer fatigue, ROI coordinates outreach across partners and uses sector specialists to bridge communication between employers and schools, helping employers see WBL as a practical talent strategy rather than a one-time community service activity. By aligning engagement across workforce, education, and economic development partners, ROI helps simplify participation for employers while expanding the number and variety of opportunities available to students across the region.

Role 2: Enhance capacity of education partners for successful WBL partnerships.

Our study of Indiana suggests that offering K–12 WBL at scale requires leveraging educational systems in two key roles: (a) school staff building the pipeline of WBL learner participants through awareness, preparation, and placement in employer-hosted WBL experiences, and (b) designing and delivering meaningful school-hosted WBL experiences. Intermediaries can play a critical role in building the capacity of school staff to play these critical roles in ways that help meet student and employer needs.

Why is this needed? Interviewees shared that school districts in Indiana recognize they need to prioritize WBL given state graduation requirements in Indiana but face three core constraints: **(a) resource limitations:** new WBL expectations come without sufficient staffing or resources to already resource-limited districts; **(b) lack of prior experience:** in most cases, schools are not experienced in delivering WBL in the manner set by the new requirements, which call for significantly greater scale in the number of student interaction and engagement. As a result, they lack the **tools, knowledge, and networks** to do it well and at scale; and **(c) lack of employer access:** many schools lack sufficient direct relationships with employers, or at best these relationships are limited. Intermediaries support schools in navigating these challenges. We found that in many instances, intermediaries in Indiana are acting as capacity multipliers for schools, enabling participation without requiring each school to build a full internal system independently. Over time, intermediaries aim to **equip educational partners with tools and support to streamline both school and employer-hosted WBL.**

What does excellence look like? Intermediaries help schools **build educator capacity** through teacher externships and communities of practice and **create, share, and update tools**, including checklists, templates, and scripts aligned to real pain points. They **collaborate to design supports that account for school constraints** (over-tapped coordinators and counselors as well as competing responsibilities) and **help schools build the capacity to deliver and scale both school and employer-hosted WBL experiences.**

What breaks when intermediaries are under resourced? Schools are being asked to build new systems, partnerships, and staff capacity to meet expanding WBL expectations, often without dedicated resources or prior experience. Without intermediary support, implementation can vary significantly across schools, particularly in communities with limited employer access or staffing capacity. As a result, access to high-quality WBL opportunities may remain uneven, making it more difficult to expand participation while maintaining quality.



Case Study Example: Region 8 ESC, Northeast IN

Region 8 Education Service Center (ESC) builds school-side capacity by pairing shared tools with structured implementation support. Through platforms such as Job Ready 360, onboarding, training, regular check-ins, and peer learning communities, Region 8 helps districts translate new WBL expectations into practice. By providing ongoing coaching, shared resources, and opportunities for schools to learn from one another, Region 8 enables districts with limited capacity to expand and sustain both employer-hosted and school-hosted WBL opportunities.

Role 3: Build and manage the operating infrastructure needed to scale WBL.

Scaling high-quality WBL requires a reliable operating infrastructure that allows many partners to deliver experiences consistently over time. Although intermediaries may directly support elements of implementation, their distinctive value in this role is establishing the systems, processes, and routines that allow schools and employers to deliver WBL consistently at scale. This role focuses on building the shared workflows, tools, routines, and capacity-management processes that move WBL from individual opportunities to a scalable system. In doing so, it **enables the other intermediary functions to serve as a coherent delivery system**, giving partners shared processes and routines needed to operate at scale.

Why is this needed? Interviewees described that as WBL expands, informal relationships and one-off processes are not enough to manage delivery at scale. Three operating challenges make this role essential: (a) fragmented processes across partners; (b) limited visibility into opportunities, student demand, and capacity; and (c) underdeveloped handoff systems that make implementation too dependent on individual staff knowledge. Intermediaries help by building the shared infrastructure that makes WBL delivery more consistent, visible, and manageable as participation grows.

What does excellence look like? Intermediaries build the operating backbone that allows WBL to function reliably as participation grows. This includes **establishing shared workflows for intake; maintaining visibility into opportunities, student demand, partner capacity, and service gaps; clarifying handoffs so information and decisions move smoothly across partners; and using feedback from implementation to refine routines** over time. Intermediaries that excel make WBL delivery less dependent on individual relationships and more consistent, manageable, and scalable across the system.

What breaks when intermediaries are under resourced? WBL remains dependent on informal workarounds rather than shared systems, processes and routines. Processes fragment, capacity gaps go unseen, handoffs break down, and delivery becomes harder to manage as participation grows.



Case Study Example: HEA, Elkhart County, IN

Horizon Education Alliance (HEA) illustrates how an intermediary can build the operating infrastructure needed to move WBL from individual placements to a scalable delivery system. HEA serves as a central connector across Elkhart County's seven public high schools and a growing network of employer partners, creating shared processes and coordination structures that reduce the need for each school and employer to develop separate systems. Rather than focusing primarily on individual student placements, HEA has established standardized workflows for employer onboarding, student preparation, paperwork, interview coordination, communication, and implementation support. By providing a common operating model across partners, HEA helps ensure WBL delivery is more consistent, manageable, and scalable across the region.

Role 4: Nurture a robust ecosystem through sustained relationship building.

Scaling WBL depends on a trusted ecosystem of partners working toward shared goals. Interviewees consistently described the value of intermediaries as providing added capacity that allows schools to focus on delivering strong student experiences without having to independently manage every employer and ecosystem relationship.

Why is this needed? Interviewees shared that one of their most critical roles is driving alignment across organizations. Implementing WBL in a fragmented funding environment means that **multiple institutions must coordinate simultaneously**; it requires change occurring across organizations with **different incentives and constraints** and **awareness that leadership and staff turnover are constant**. Intermediaries play a critical role in nurturing local ecosystems, serving as accelerators of this change through building trust across organizations, maintaining relationships through leadership transitions, and helping partners understand one another's needs and constraints. This role formalizes workable arrangements between schools, employers, and other partners and allows for continuous iteration between all partners in the ecosystem

What does excellence look like? Interviewees in Indiana noted that to nurture a robust ecosystem successfully, they need to hire and manage a mix of staff with deep knowledge of and strong networks with key partner types (school, industry). These teams then need to perform the following activities well: **(a) mapping key players across the ecosystem and cultivating trust-based relationships over time**; **(b) providing neutral, safe environments** for hosting regional and local ecosystem convenings and standing meetings with thoughtfully crafted agendas, not just for leaders but different types of staff; **(c) mobilizing coordinated action** by clarifying action items, decisions, owners, and follow-up; and **(d) documenting clear roles and responsibilities and referral norms** across organizations. Intermediaries stressed the ongoing nature of this work: High turnover at partner organizations means that relying only on previous investments in relationships is not viable and requires continuous relationship cultivation and onboarding of new partners and leaders.

What breaks when intermediaries are under resourced? Coordination weakens, roles become unclear, and opportunities for alignment are missed. Trust erodes, duplication increases, and WBL depends on individual relationships rather than durable cross-system partnerships.



Case Study Example: South Bend Regional Chamber, Northern IN

The South Bend Regional Chamber demonstrates how intermediaries strengthen local ecosystems through sustained coordination and relationship management. They convene educators, employers, intermediaries, and other community partners through regular meetings and collaborative planning efforts, creating consistent opportunities for partners to share information, align priorities, and address implementation challenges together. By serving as a neutral convener and creating trusted spaces for candid discussion and problem solving, the Chamber helps partners work through challenges, clarify expectations, and build relationships across organizations. Through ongoing communication, coordination, and relationship building, the Chamber reduces fragmentation and helps partners operate as part of a coordinated regional workforce ecosystem rather than through isolated initiatives.

Role 5: Ensure consistent policy translation and continuous improvement.

Although the first four roles focus on building and operating the WBL system, intermediaries also serve a critical cross-cutting role: ensuring that policy is consistently interpreted, implemented, and improved over time. This role integrates policy translation with data, measurement, and continuous improvement, enabling the system to function coherently and evolve.

Why is this needed? Indiana and several states are expanding WBL through new diploma requirements and broader participation goals, but consistent, high-quality implementation remains challenging. Interviewees noted the following barriers: **(a) lack of a common understanding in what counts as WBL** and how experiences should be structured; **(b) a gap between policy intent and implementation capacity**, with requirements like training plans difficult to operationalize without practical tools; **(c) ongoing misalignment among stakeholders**, leading to friction and inconsistent practices; and **(d) limited system feedback**, as insufficient data collection obscures gaps in student access, experience quality, employer participation, and alignment with policy goals. Intermediaries play a critical role by translating policy into clear, actionable guidance, aligning stakeholders, and supporting implementation that maintains coherence with statewide goals.

What does excellence look like? Excellence in policy translation requires intermediaries facilitating shared understanding and consistent execution across partners. This includes providing **clear, plain-language guidance on requirements**; supporting partners in **translating policy into workflows**, roles, and handoffs; **developing and sharing practical tools**, such as templates, checklists, and guidance documents; **using implementation feedback to refine guidance** over time; and **identifying data needed to understand where implementation is falling short of policy intent**, including patterns in student participation, experience quality, employer engagement, and outcomes. Intermediaries that excel ensure policy is experienced as a clear, supported set of practices rather than a “check-the-box” mandate, using data to drive continuous improvement. Effective use of data for continuous improvement depends on broader investments in data infrastructure and shared measurement systems.

What breaks when intermediaries are under resourced? Definitions drift across regions and partners, leading to inconsistent quality and uneven implementation. Schools and employers may be forced to interpret requirements independently, resulting in duplication of effort, slower execution, and increased risk of noncompliance or low-quality experiences. Implementation may not keep pace with policy intent, undermining the development of a coherent, high-quality statewide WBL system.



Case Study Example: EmployIndy, Marion County, IN

EmployIndy demonstrates how intermediaries operationalize policy by translating statewide WBL expectations into coordinated implementation. Through its career-connected learning continuum, EmployIndy organizes opportunities into exploration, engagement, and experience activities, giving schools and employers a shared framework for delivering WBL. EmployIndy also invests in data infrastructure that tracks participation, supports reporting and dashboards, and generates actionable insights on student engagement and program implementation, enabling partners to monitor progress, identify gaps, and continuously refine WBL delivery at scale.

Lessons From Indiana on Mobilizing Intermediaries to Offer WBL at Scale: Three Calls to Action

States like Indiana that have ambitious goals for scaling access to high-quality WBL are counting on intermediaries being accelerators for scale-up. Interviewees in Indiana consistently shared that to play this role successfully, they need the right enabling conditions and support. Below are the commonly cited strategies that intermediaries in Indiana identified when asked, “If you had a magic wand, what would you do to make your work easier?” Key themes that emerged from their responses are summarized below and align well with what the evidence base says about enabling conditions that support effective intermediary work (See Exhibit 4).

1. Provide intermediaries and schools with stable, long-term flexible funding for organizational capacity.

Intermediaries’ top concern was how to obtain the sustained investment required to build and maintain the staffing, relationships, and systems needed to scale WBL. Short-term, project-based funding limits effectiveness and leads to start–stop cycles that undermine employer and partner trust. Policymakers and funders should prioritize multiyear funding streams that support core operating functions, including employer engagement, coordination, data management, and continuous improvement, and enable intermediaries to retain the skilled staff required to execute these roles.

Intermediaries noted that they cannot scale WBL alone; they operate alongside schools to recruit, prepare, and support students. Dedicated and adequately resourced WBL coordination roles within schools are essential to creating a functioning system. These roles complement, rather than replace, career advising and coaching functions that help students explore and navigate career pathways. Policymakers should normalize these roles as part of the education workforce, ensuring they are adequately resourced, recognized, and stable, rather than treated as add-on responsibilities. That way intermediaries can focus more of their energy on being “capacity amplifiers” rather than “capacity supplementers.”

2. Strengthen intermediary effectiveness through shared guidance, tools, and learning networks.

Intermediaries noted that although they play a central role in translating policy into practice, developing tools, and facilitating implementation, they are most effective when they are supported by shared guidance, resources, and opportunities for collective learning. Without these supports, intermediaries often spend valuable time independently interpreting policies, developing similar tools, and solving common challenges in isolation.

States and funders can strengthen intermediary effectiveness by investing in shared implementation resources, common tools and templates, coordinated policy guidance, and learning networks that enable intermediaries to exchange promising practices and solve problems collectively. These supports reduce duplication, increase consistency across regions, and allow intermediaries to focus more of their capacity on building partnerships and delivering high-quality WBL experiences.

3. Modernize data systems to reduce burden and improve decision making.

Fragmented and duplicative data systems create significant administrative burdens and limit the ability to manage WBL at scale. Investments should focus on simplifying data entry, improving interoperability across platforms, and enabling real-time data use for both reporting and continuous improvement. These investments enable intermediaries and partners to move beyond administrative reporting and use data for continuous improvement, gap identification, and implementation support. Streamlined systems allow intermediaries and partners to focus on delivery and quality rather than administrative compliance.

Exhibit 4. Insights From Literature: System Conditions That Enable Intermediary Effectiveness

The actions recommended above were articulated by Indiana intermediaries during interviews and are supported through research:

- **Stable, long-term funding and organizational capacity for intermediaries and school partners.** Intermediary effectiveness depends on sustained staffing, infrastructure, and financial stability, particularly for functions such as employer engagement and coordination that are difficult to fund through traditional program streams (Advance CTE, 2025; Education First, 2022; Ratway et al., 2018; White & Downs, 2023). Schools and employers also often lack the staffing and infrastructure required to implement WBL at scale, requiring dedicated coordination roles and broader system capacity to support delivery (Advance CTE, 2016; CCRS Center, 2017; Education Strategy Group & Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, 2019; Ratway et al., 2018).
- **Intermediary capacity and structures for shared learning.** Effective systems rely on ongoing convening, partnership building, shared governance, and clear role definition across institutions to reduce fragmentation and support coordinated action (Braxton & Roach, 2023; Dempsey et al., 2016; Hartung et al., 2020).
- **Data infrastructure and shared measurement systems.** Strong intermediary efforts are supported by shared data systems, tracking tools, and performance measurement approaches that reduce fragmentation and enable coordination and continuous improvement (Advance CTE, 2025; Braxton & Roach, 2023; Education First, 2022; Morris, 2020; Ratway et al., 2018; Strada Education Foundation, 2026).

Conclusion

Our case study of Indiana suggests that scaling WBL is not simply a question of expanding programs; it is a system design challenge. Indiana's experience highlights both the promise and the need for continued support of intermediaries as a lever for scale. Strong policy signals and emerging intermediary networks can create momentum, but sustained investment in capacity, coordination, shared systems, and continuous learning is needed to convert momentum into lasting impact. For policymakers and funders, the implication is clear: If WBL is to become a reliable pathway rather than an episodic opportunity, intermediaries must be recognized, resourced, and supported as essential system builders.

What Comes Next: From Emerging Practice to Scalable Systems

AIR and Ascend Indiana have established a learning partnership to continue to support the State of Indiana in achieving its ambitious goals for youth WBL, such as the following:

- Conducting a **cost study analysis** to better understand the resources required for WBL intermediaries to perform the core functions that enable high-quality WBL at scale. The study analyzes a sample of intermediaries across the state to estimate the staffing, activities, and infrastructure needed to deliver and expand WBL services. Findings will provide actionable insights to inform investment strategies, strengthen intermediary capacity, and support the development of a more sustainable and scalable WBL ecosystem in Indiana.
- Exploring establishment of a **National Work-Based Learning Infrastructure Collaborative**, a multiyear national collaborative focused on the intermediary infrastructure required to scale K-12 WBL.

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