



Work-Based Learning: Myths vs. Facts



Tennessee is revitalizing work-based learning (WBL) to build a stronger pipeline of talent into growing industries. Your company’s participation is necessary to help young people gain relevant experience and strengthen their employability skills. The state’s vision to create a skills-based “gold standard” for WBL has resulted in new state policies, curriculum, and a regional professional development support system to improve program quality. This work has created a strong foundation, but companies are needed to build a robust employment pipeline, building community awareness for the careers of today and the future. Ultimately, students and companies can work together through capstone experiences such as unpaid internships or paid work experience.

Myth	Fact
I can’t work with minors. They must be at least 18 years old.	WBL is a capstone experience for talented and motivated young people and companies have final say regarding which students are qualified. WBL programs require that students be at least 16 years of age and demonstrate readiness attitudes and skills prior to participation. Minors may legally work in Tennessee at the age of 14 or 15, see Tennessee Child Labor Laws (T.C.A. § 50-5-105).
There’s too much liability at stake for our company to work with minors.	Workers’ Compensation protects every employee equally, regardless of age (T.C.A. § 50-6-102 (11) (A)). Neither age nor years of experience are calculated into the cost of providing workers’ compensation nor the payout of claims. Workers’ Compensation is calculated in the same way for all workers regardless of age and is based on (a) salary and (b) the classification of the actual job the WBL student is hired to do. As a result, actual costs are low for hiring WBL students and existing protections are sufficient. Unpaid internships also allow students to gain work experience without being considered an “employee” if they are primarily on site to learn and receive no direct compensation from the company. In such cases, commercial liability insurance (companies) and high-risk accident insurance (school districts) protect students and companies.
My industry/workplace is too dangerous for minors.	There are only a few prohibited occupations for minors who are 16 or older (T.C.A. § 50-5-106) that are unrelated to your workplace or industry as a whole. In most cases, OSHA requirements ensure that you’re already protecting your employees to the same extent you’d need to protect a minor. There are many roles that young people can fill to give them valuable exposure to your workplace to spark an interest in long-term employment in your industry.
Minors are prohibited from working in our jobs.	Students enrolled in Tennessee’s CTE programs who are taking WBL, however, can do more than the average teenager, including working in advanced manufacturing, construction, and agriculture (T.C.A. § 50-5-107). Required WBL paperwork protects companies, schools, and students by documenting eligibility and compliance with the law.
HR says we can’t even bring minors on the floor of our facility!	In reality, company policy may be the only real barrier to engaging with the most talented and qualified students. There are many ways to ensure quality and safe learning experiences that create a stronger workforce pipeline for your company: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a temp agency to hire minors while they’re still in high school • Work with CTE students with between 360 and 720 hours of safety/skills-based training in your industry • Create an internship/part-time position to complete educational/special projects and experience various roles or departments • Draft a contract that defines your company’s responsibility for non-employees, like unpaid interns • Provide an umbrella accident policy to protect non-employees (interns, job shadow students, or tour groups)