

# A Look at Iowa's Innovative High School Apprenticeship Program

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## IOWA YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP BY THE NUMBERS

Iowa's expanded Registered Apprenticeships for 16- to 24-year-olds led to **4,500 new apprentices over the 2016–19 fiscal years, or about 1,100 a year.**

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For 16- to 24-year-olds who completed apprenticeships in Iowa, **annual earnings averaged \$42,000.**

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In June 2020, more than **67 businesses participated** in the high school Registered Apprenticeship initiative.

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Among youth apprentices in the state, **the high school model includes 111 youth apprentices from 26 schools who participate in 12 Registered Apprenticeships** as early as age 16.

Youth apprenticeships are an effective way for students to earn money while they learn skills for a rewarding career, and for employers to grow their talent pipeline. To expand opportunities for students, Iowa launched its youth apprenticeship initiative statewide. Although many high schools in the US have work-based learning programs, Iowa's initiative is notable for its quality and focus through Registered Apprenticeships, engagement of high schools as program sponsors, and potential for expansion based on employer and student interest.

To explore Iowa's apprenticeship initiative, Urban staff interviewed companies, schools, and students in the programs, as well as the governor's office, which plays a critical role in encouraging businesses to adopt youth apprenticeship strategies and promoting partnerships between schools and employers.

## HOW IOWA'S YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP MODEL WORKS

High schools, in partnership with employers, currently provide student apprenticeships spanning 12 occupations across industry sectors that include advanced manufacturing, information technology, child care, and health care.

Apprenticeships typically begin with an intensive on-the-job learning experience, usually the summer after students' junior year of high school. This program design allows apprentices to complete all classroom courses before high school graduation.

Employers in the program hire the apprentices, pay wages, oversee apprentices' mentorship, and offer the context in which apprentices learn their occupations. Participating employers range from medium-size firms like Weiler in Knoxville, Iowa, with 315 employees to large corporations like John Deere with over 74,000 employees worldwide.

## HIGH SCHOOLS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN IOWA'S PROGRAM

As part of Iowa's statewide expansion of youth apprenticeships since 2016, 26 secondary schools have engaged in Registered Apprenticeship programs, with 19 serving as sponsors recognized by the US Department of Labor. Leveraging high schools and school districts as sponsors is unusual in the US because sponsors have historically been businesses, industry associations, community colleges, or labor union–employer joint programs.

In Iowa's model, a high school sponsor partners with at least one employer to design the program, which includes the following:

- **On-the-job training**—the practical and “hands-on” experience apprentices learn on the job with a mentor
- **Job-related instruction**—the classroom instruction delivered by the high school and/or community college
- **Progressive wages**—how much the employer pays the apprentices based on entry and advancing skills
- **Supervision and mentoring**—guidance and advice provided by an experienced professional

## WHY EMPLOYERS BENEFIT FROM YOUTH APPRENTICESHIPS

Registered youth apprenticeships are an attractive option for businesses challenged with finding and retaining a reliable workforce. Before the COVID-19 economic disruptions, Iowa had a low unemployment rate, at 2.8 percent in February 2020. Further, millions of skilled workers will be needed to replace retiring workers. In Iowa manufacturing, one in four workers is age 55 or older, and only 9 percent are under age 25.

Participating in youth apprenticeships allows businesses to be more proactive in shaping the talent pipeline, not only for their firm but also for their entire local labor market. Iowa businesses participating in the effort indicated that youth apprenticeships can be part of an overall talent development strategy to fill vacancies and prepare for the future.

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*This high school student apprenticeship effort has been one of the biggest employee engagement projects we've instituted in years. —David Ottavianelli, director of strategic investments at John Deere*

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## WHY STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM YOUTH APPRENTICESHIPS

High school apprenticeships offer students the opportunity to pair paid and structured on-the-job learning with technical education. Student apprentices gain valuable, substantive work experience that many of their peers cannot. They are poised to launch rewarding careers upon completion of high school and their apprenticeship programs.

Apprentices indicated a high degree of satisfaction with their apprenticeships. One apprentice in Iowa's program is making progress toward completing her associate's degree through dual-credit courses and the academic apprenticeship requirements. Another apprentice earned nearly 30 college credit hours that will count toward his degree, while he maintains his employment at the company.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR IOWA'S HIGH SCHOOL APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Although Iowa's high school apprenticeship initiative could be improved by expanding the number and range of occupations available to students, it has shown to be a promising model. Other states and localities interested in developing a high school-backed apprenticeship initiative can learn from the successful elements of Iowa's program:

1. **Partnerships between high schools and private sector businesses.** Schools and companies deliver high-quality technical education to help student apprentices become qualified and perform well in various occupational areas.
2. **Convening organizations.** Groups—such as the Iowa Business Council, apprenticeship intermediaries, and the state government—bring interested parties together to review progress and persuade newcomers to join.
3. **State leadership and investment.** Governor Reynolds's leadership and state funding investment has supported the youth apprenticeship model's expansion.

To learn more about Iowa's youth apprenticeship model, see the Urban Institute case study titled Iowa High School Apprenticeships: Creating Pathways to Promising Careers at <https://urbn.is/2NqyzA>