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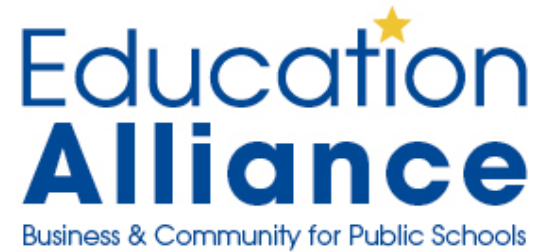
Amelia Courts
Education Alliance

Since 2013, Amelia has served as the President and CEO of the Education Alliance – a statewide non-profit organization that mobilizes business and community partnerships to equip students for success. Dr. Courts is passionate about developing West Virginia’s human capital by investing in our youth. Under her leadership, the Alliance has been a leader in advancing innovative workforce initiatives in STEM, work-based learning, and the recent \$4.7M ARC grant to advance career pathways. She previously served as Assistant State Superintendent at the West Virginia Department of Education.

Three Keys for Transforming West Virginia’s Workforce

“I was really hopeless,” said Anthony. “As a high school sophomore, I was shuttling between three different foster families. Coming out of COVID, I was behind in all my classes and I just could not see a bright future for myself. But that all changed when I was accepted into the Toyota 4T program. I actually started making an effort in my classes, my teacher at Ben Franklin Career Center and my Toyota mentor Shawn really supported me and taught me a lot, and I even got a paid internship my senior year. Today, I’m a full-time production team member at Toyota.”

Success stories like Anthony’s provide a powerful roadmap for identifying West Virginia’s barriers to workforce development and advancing innovative opportunities to transform it. Since the fall of 2021, the Education Alliance and our partners have been working to transform the state’s workforce ecosystem by creating accelerated, seamless career pathways from K-12 to high-skill/high-wage jobs for West Virginia



data clearly reflects that there is a growing need to transform the region’s workforce development, particularly in the manufacturing and healthcare sectors. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook (April 2022) healthcare occupations are projected to grow 16% from 2020 to 2030, much faster than the average for all occupations, adding about 2.6 million new jobs more than any of the other occupational groups. Similarly, BLS reports Manufacturing is forecasting workforce growth in many areas, including manufacturing laborers (7%), Industrial Machinery Mechanics, Machinery Maintenance Workers, and Millwrights (19%),

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youth. The CAREERS (Career Acceleration, Readiness, and Employment Experiences for Regional Students) model is an industry and education partnership that accelerates the number of youth transitioning into high-skill/high-wage employment.

The foundation for achieving this vision starts with a crystal-clear understanding of the problem. First, economic development

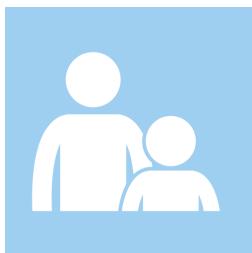
and Manufacturing Sales Representatives (5%). Despite this projected growth, many, if not most, West Virginia youth are unaware of these high-skill/high-wage employment opportunities.

Second, employment data indicates the perplexing “disconnect” between high job vacancies and a low workforce participation rate in the region. As of September 2022, data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St.

Louis shows West Virginia (tied with Mississippi) has the lowest labor participation rate in the nation (55%). While West Virginia's labor participation data is impacted by an older population, it is also shaped by generational poverty and a disconnect between job openings and youth workforce development opportunities in local communities. And, although a career is not a panacea, employment has long been associated with key wellness components, including self-esteem, self-worth, purpose, and identity. For many West Virginia youth, especially underserved students, the path from school to a good job is an obstacle course.

Third, there is a clear need to transform equity and opportunity in workforce at scale across the region. Students facing economic disparities may be unable to participate in summer or after-school internship opportunities due to lack of transportation or the need to work part-time. Many rural students across our state desire a work-based learning experience but lack a systematic approach to placement with supportive employers who can enable career exploration.

These are just a few of the workforce barriers facing our youth. But now for the good news. West Virginia can meet the workforce demands of current and future employers if we redefine "workforce development" around three goals: engaging earlier, designing quality experiences, and accelerating pathways.



Engaging Earlier

Data indicate there are measurable benefits of work-based learning, including increasing students' persistence, graduation, and employment rates, with notable gains for underserved students such as those from underserved racial, ethnic,

and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, for the nearly 55% of West Virginians who do not attend college, the post-secondary opportunities for quality work-based learning have traditionally been out of reach. In 2023, West Virginia Health Systems launched their innovative MedEd program, which follows the Toyota 4T and CAREERS model. This spring, they accepted their second cohort (70 high school juniors) to begin onsite experiences at their hospitals this fall.

Employers – if you are currently hosting college interns, I challenge you to pair that opportunity with one for high school students in the coming year. If your business is not yet ready

for internships, consider contacting the Education Alliance to match you with a 5–10-hour work-based learning experience in your community. We must engage earlier and start younger.



Designing Quality Experiences

The key here is "experience." Students need more than "job fairs" and speakers talking about jobs. There's strong evidence that personal, real-world experiences, even as young as middle school, can have a profound impact on young

people's future career selection. Quality work-based learning experiences cannot be developed in isolated silos. They must be co-designed and co-delivered with industry and educators working together to ensure students' skill development meets the required competencies and to provide industry mentoring to support students throughout the experiences. This requires a partnership approach with regular communication and flexibility from both industry and education to design quality experiences.

Educators – if you would like help in bringing industry to the table to co-design quality experiences for your students, please contact the [EducationAlliance.org](https://www.educationalliance.org) today.



Accelerating Pathways

The CAREERS model is not about filling "dead end jobs" but rather jumpstarting the transition from school to high-skills/high-wage career pathways through tiered readiness experiences and support from industry instructors and mentors. As

students advance, they are assessed for stackable skills and resume enhancement and offered dual credit opportunities to broaden access to future post-secondary learning. In addition, the model accelerates each student's future lifetime career earnings by launching them on a career pathway in industries that provide tuition reimbursement, on-the-job training, and career advancement for upward mobility.

The opportunity is great. The time is now. Programs like Toyota's 4T Academy and WVU Health System's MedEd are leading the way in workforce development by engaging earlier, designing quality experiences, and accelerating pathways. Please join us in a partnership approach to transform the workforce pipeline and create a brighter future for our youth. ▼