



# Lessons for Employer-School Partnerships to Provide Meaningful Youth Employment Opportunities

Megan Carney, Julie Gilbertsen, Kristine Andrews, Shantai Peckoo

Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) is a philanthropic organization that utilizes the venture capital model of investing to assist and partner with nonprofits in the Greater Washington, DC region.<sup>a</sup> In 2010, VPP created the youthCONNECT Network in the Washington metropolitan area—an effort to bring together high-performing nonprofit organizations to better the educational achievement, career outcomes, and healthy behaviors of youth ages 14 to 24.<sup>a</sup> In 2015, VPP added youthCONNECT to Ready for Work, its initiative to promote career- and college-readiness among high school students in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

Ready for Work—a collaboration between VPP, Prince George’s County, and five local nonprofit organizations—was a three-pronged strategy to improve student outcomes in three Prince George’s County high schools: Suitland High School, High Point High School, and Oxon Hill High School. The three Ready for Work strategies are as follows:

1. Strengthen career and technical education programs.
2. Expand VPP’s youthCONNECT model.
3. Provide students with meaningful work experiences.

This brief is one of five products that summarize key findings from Child Trends’ implementation evaluation of the three Ready for Work strategies. Here, we present lessons learned related to the third strategy—providing students with real work experiences—and explore the role that employer partners play in implementing this focal area.

<sup>a</sup> Investment Profile – Ready for Work. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.vppartners.org/investments/ready-for-work/>

---

## Ready for Work: A three-part strategy

1. **Strengthening career and technical education programs:** This strategy focuses on enhancing the implementation of career and technical education (CTE) programming at both the system and school levels to strengthen student’s technical and academic skills.
  2. **Expansion of VPP’s youthCONNECT model:** To improve students’ readiness for post-secondary education and employment, this strategy focuses on strengthening the collaboration of a group of nonprofit partners and school leaders to provide wraparound services to students in PGPCS high schools.
  3. **Providing students with meaningful work experiences:** Through a partnership between VPP and PGPCS’s Summer Youth Enrichment Program (SYEP), students are connected with local employers to gain meaningful work experiences before they graduate high school.
-



The information in this brief will be especially useful for employers looking to increase and improve their youth employment opportunities by partnering with schools or youth-centered organizations like VPP. Since the onset of Child Trends' implementation evaluation of the Ready for Work initiative, a global pandemic, COVID-19, changed the landscape of school learning environments and employment opportunities available to youth in the US. Despite this, the lessons learned from Ready for Work about how to effectively engage youth and partner with schools remain relevant for employers who would like to diversity their talent pool by providing local students with employment and professional development opportunities. For this brief, we incorporated input about the Ready for Work initiative from staff at Kaiser Permanente and Industrial Bank (two of the initiative's main employer partners), the Prince George's County Youth@Work/Summer Youth Enrichment Program, and Venture Philanthropy Partners.

In sum, we identified five main takeaways from Ready for Work's employer partnerships:

1. The success of employer-school partnerships relies on clear communication and a shared understanding of partnership goals and roles.
2. Hiring youth can help employers build their talent pipeline.
3. Employers have the flexibility to tailor their involvement with youth according to their goals and capacity for program engagement.
4. Understanding the specific needs of high school students will help employers maximize youth employment opportunities.
5. Data collection can inform and tailor internship experiences for both youth and employers.

## Background of the Youth@Work/Summer Youth Enrichment Program

VPP partnered with Prince George's County to support the county's Youth@Work/Summer Youth Enrichment Program (SYEP), a summer internship program that provides youth with meaningful work experiences through job readiness training and paid internships with local employer partners. The program is offered for youth ages 14 to 22, and the internships lasts six weeks at one of the SYEP worksites. The worksites include government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and local businesses in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. In 2019, 6,943 youth participated in SYEP. Of those, 3,698 were placed in government agencies or nonprofits and 3,245 were placed in local businesses.<sup>b</sup>

Under Ready for Work, VPP also helped coordinate school field trips to employer partner sites (e.g., Kaiser Permanente [Kaiser], Industrial Bank, Capital One, and the Washington Football Team) for students enrolled in Ready for Work programming. These field trips aimed to expose Ready for Work and career and technical education (CTE) students to employment

---

<sup>b</sup> For a full list of employer partners, please refer to the SYEP Annual Report. <https://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/32265/2019-SYEP-ANNUAL-REPORT--revised-March-18-2020?bidId=>



opportunities and potential career paths. The visits also helped schools' CTE programs foster local employer connections. With these connections, CTE students gained additional opportunities to learn about industries aligned with their CTE coursework and interests.

## Lessons Learned

Below, we share some important lessons for employers interested in incorporating or building upon youth talent in their workplaces. The following information details the benefits of hiring youth and provides guidance on forming relationships with local schools and youth employment organizations. The lessons here are based on the experiences of business partners, VPP staff, and Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) staff serving youth as part of the initiative.

### **The success of employer-school partnerships relies on clear communication and a shared understanding of partnership goals and roles.**

For an initiative like Ready for Work to be effective, all partners must have a shared understanding of the initiative's goals, and of each partner's role in meeting those goals. Prior to implementation of Ready for Work, VPP and some of its investor partners reached out to several foundations, businesses, and agencies in Prince George's County and the Washington metropolitan area to gauge their interest in hiring students. VPP's call for employer partners was targeted at those employers who experienced challenges in hiring employees with sufficient hard and soft skills and who had a desire to give back to their community. In their pitch for employers to join the initiative, VPP emphasized its goal to provide Prince George's County youth with valuable work experience to build their skills and competencies for successful future careers. Part of this goal involved ensuring that employers' needs were met through funding, filling employment gaps, or thinking through strategies on how to better serve youth. With this in mind, employers reported positive, beneficial relationships with VPP: They found VPP to be transparent in their communication and goal setting, and intentional in ensuring that employers were involved and engaged with the initiative. Employers appreciated VPP's advocacy and assistance when thinking through strategies on how to better serve youth through Ready for Work.

While the extent of most employers' involvement in Ready for Work was serving as an SYEP worksite, some partners—including Capital One, Kaiser Permanente, and the Peterson Family Foundation—were also important investors in the initiative. VPP held frequent meetings with these highly involved investors to facilitate a more hands-on approach in developing and implementing the initiative. For instance, Kaiser and VPP met at least every other month to discuss CTE programming, potential curriculum development, and field trip coordination. VPP and the Peterson Family Foundation also met once a month to provide updates on the initiative's progress and discuss fundraising strategies.

Employers and schools encountered occasional challenges in collaboration, expectations, and planning under the Ready for Work Initiative. The communication between the school system and employers was sometimes inconsistent, especially when setting up field trips, as field trip



approval required many moving parts and signoffs from the PGCPS school staff and parents. Employers also reported difficulties reaching schools after trips to inquire about hiring students. One possible reason for this challenge is the prior lack of relationship between the schools and employers. Prior to Ready for Work, past employers who partnered with PGCPS had not expressed a desire to be as hands-on in providing students with internships. The schools' previous working relationships with employers were unsuccessful, as employers expressed a lack of communication on the schools' ends. Throughout the life of Ready for Work, school staff and leadership were busy with various pressing priorities and struggled with involvement in youth employment opportunities. Best practices to achieve a shared understanding between schools and employers include engaging in frequent communication and establishing initial buy-in from all stakeholders. Employers and schools should also maintain a consistent dialogue to build sustainable partnerships and grant youth more pathways to real work experiences.

### **Hiring youth can help employers build their talent pipeline.**

At a time when many of the region's employers are having difficulty filling open job positions, youth internship programs can provide future benefits. According to VPP and Prince George's County staff, the employer partners who were most hands-on in engaging youth in their internship experiences recognized how shaping youth's careers would benefit their talent pipeline over time. These partners prioritized tailoring the internship program to address their employment gaps and long-term needs. Kaiser, for instance, ran projections and recognized they were about to experience a large gap between the number of people pursuing a career in health care IT and the number of positions they needed to fill. To alleviate this projected employee deficit, Kaiser hired 20 interns in their IT department through SYEP, 10 of whom later became full-time employees. The way in which Kaiser utilized their participation in SYEP not only helped students gain credible work experience, but also allowed the organization to fill gaps in its employee base.

### **Employers have the flexibility to tailor their involvement with youth according to their goals and capacity for program engagement.**

We found many ways in which employers successfully structured their involvement in the program and engagement with youth participants. For example, field trips to Industrial Bank consisted of a mix of presentations, staff conversations with students about their work experiences, and a walking tour of different parts of the bank. Capital One also brought in staff members from various fields to talk about their career pathways with students during field trips. Industrial Bank's internship program assigned department leads to serve as youth mentors, and provided interns with small assignments and shadowing opportunities with their mentors. Industrial Bank's field trip and internship programs feature a dynamic, hands-on format that allows students to be more engaged and familiarized with employment at the bank.

Employers who wanted to be involved in Ready for Work but lacked the capacity to provide an intensive internship experience still found creative ways to support youth. For example, an employer at the waterfront convention center at National Harbor—a large planned community



and business district in Prince George's County—hires youth from SYEP every year and tries to teach students how to learn and move up the employment ladder. Other organizations that did not have open positions for youth but still wanted to give support found alternative ways to serve youth in Prince George's County. For example, one regional employer, TRex, provided IT training to teachers to keep them up to date on current technology to better serve their students. In addition, MedStar Health—which operates 10 hospitals and more than 200 health care facilities in the Washington-Baltimore metro area—created hospital volunteer opportunities for younger youth ages 10 to 18 after having difficulty providing structured internships for Prince George's County students. To improve their youth volunteer recruitment, MedStar focused on reaching out to Prince George's County students' parents with this opportunity and established its own bus stop to improve accessibility.

Employers interested in youth engagement should also thoughtfully select staff to work with youth. For student field trips, Industrial Bank was intentional about bringing in staff who were experienced with youth engagement and excited to speak about their careers. Employers also found that sharing their personal experiences with students seemed to resonate with and encourage them to explore their career or field. During the Capital One field trip, for instance, one staff member who spoke with students was an Oxon Hill High School graduate with firsthand knowledge of the PGCPs student experience.

Finally, participating in an initiative like Ready for Work depends on the amount of funding that employers can set aside for paid youth internships. When VPP first approached employer partners about Ready for Work, many said they were not able to hire youth until the following year, when funding could be incorporated into the annual budget in advance. Because providing youth with meaningful work experience should include equitable compensation, employers need to budget and allocate enough funds to sufficiently pay youth for their work.

### **Understanding the specific needs of high school students will help employers maximize youth employment opportunities.**

Another challenge for the Ready for Work initiative was that some employers were wary to join because they did not want to hire high school-aged youth. Some were concerned that these students would lack proper certification and licensing or not be able to meet job expectations. Through the initiative, VPP encouraged employers to take a chance on hiring youth, but to also remember that high school students have a different set of needs than the average employee. For instance, one employer recognized that many of their interns did not yet have a driver's license and responded by offering to provide transportation. Bank of America conducted additional training for their staff members on being a better employer for young people, and VPP sent the materials from those trainings to all its employer partners. Overall, employers may need to adapt to ensure that students get the most out of their internship experience.

This flexibility became especially relevant in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic hit, employers had to shift to address student needs in remote settings. For example, Industrial Bank did not host on-site interns in Summer 2020, but did provide virtual financial literacy classes for students all over Prince George's County, with multiple sessions



to best fit students' schedules. Other employers that partnered with PGCPs through SYEP still offered some internship experiences for youth in Summer 2020 in a virtual format.

### **Data collection can inform and tailor internship experiences for both youth and employers.**

One important step that employers can take to maximize youth internships is to analyze their own organization and project future staffing gaps. This strategy can allow employers to tailor their internships to not only fit the needs of youth, but also their organizations. Further, employers can improve their internship outcomes by collecting data. Employers benefit from collecting data and feedback from youth and employees to gauge their satisfaction. VPP coached SYEP on survey making and provided guidance on best practices for collecting youth and employee feedback, in turn improving their surveys over time. One respondent suggested using survey data to better understand the types of experiences that youth would like to gain at the outset of their internship, and emphasized the importance of follow-up/post-internship surveys. The latter can better gauge the impact of the internship for youth participants and provide information on improving the program and career experience to fit students and employer needs.

## **Conclusion**

A primary motivating factor for the Ready for Work Initiative was the reported lack of career-ready young people in the Prince George's County community to meet the needs of the region's employers. While Ready for Work centered youth outcomes, it also aimed to create mutually beneficial relationships between schools, youth, and employers. Employer-youth partnerships help youth by providing them with workplace exposure and experience and help employers by building a youth talent pipeline to fill current and projected employment gaps. Hiring youth employees or interns is an investment in the workforce and the entire community, as it allows youth to build the skills necessary to meaningfully contribute to their careers after high school and beyond.

The Ready for Work initiative highlighted ways in which employers can connect and partner with schools and youth-serving organizations, like VPP. The lessons learned from Ready for Work can greatly benefit employers who would like to participate in an initiative that provides youth employment and professional development opportunities to local students.

### **Suggested citation**

Carney, M., Gilbertsen, J., Andrews, K., & Peckoo, S. (2022). Lessons for employer-school partnerships to provide meaningful youth employment opportunities. *Child Trends*. <https://doi.org/10.56417/934t1514t>

