



Research Brief

Internships for High School Students

Question: How can school structure workplace internships for high school students?

Summary of Findings:

According to Stephen Borkowski (2008), “internships are one of the most important ways students gain experience and start to make contacts within their field.” Speaking directly to high school students, Borkowski adds that there are three major purposes for most existing internship programs:

- Work experience at a respected company or organization will only strengthen college applications.
- Internships allow students to explore potential careers and courses of study for college.
- Internships can help students understand how a professional organization operates.

Benefits of Internships

James Clark, from the Southern Regional Education Board, says that internships are linked directly to improved student performance. ‘Many high schools cannot provide the in-depth career studies or modern technology and equipment to prepare students for today’s workplace. A well-planned...internship can meet these needs. Students benefit from seeing real-life applications of the academic, technical, intellectual and personal skills that are being taught in high school. Internships also give students access to primary jobs — jobs that lead to high wages and career pathways — rather than low-skill, low-wage secondary jobs or “youth” jobs usually available to high school students. Clark continues, saying that internships benefit teachers, students, employers and the school itself.

- Students benefit from working and learning in a high-skill, high-wage environment and discover how the knowledge is applied in the workplace.
- Teachers benefit from a better understanding of what business and industry expect.
- High schools can assure students and parents that graduates will be well prepared for promising careers.
- Employers’ relationships with local schools can produce qualified job candidates for the companies.

Linking the School and the Workplace

In order to be effective in boosting student performance, internship programs for high school students must be linked, directly, to the school’s academic program. The U.S. Department of Education (1995), says that the links between school curriculum and workplace demands strengthen student motivation to learn and their ultimate achievement. These programs also encourage all teachers to create “authentic” learning experiences that help students succeed in the workplace.

Mentorships and Adult Support

A critical element in all successful high school internships is strong mentorship by competent adults. Gene Bottoms and his colleagues found that “the most improved schools made greater gains in students participating in quality work-based learning with adult mentors. Most improved schools provided students with an adult mentor who taught them how to do good work and with employers who encouraged them to develop good customer relations.” (Bottoms, [et.al.](#), 2006).

Research supported by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation affirms the importance of mentorships, especially for disadvantaged youth, and the Foundation devotes a substantial portion of their resources to helping local communities build and sustain these adult relationships for high school students. “Low-income students can benefit tremendously from, but may have very limited access to, mentorships and internships with successful individuals and organizations.”



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Research Brief

Characteristics of Successful High School Intern Programs

The most successful programs share specific characteristics that distinguish them from college level internships or formal apprenticeships.

- Programs are offered to students within a specific city or region, eliminating the need for long-distance travel or relocation.
- School based career-or-school to work coordinators work closely with guidance staff, teachers, and administrators to identify and recruit students who are good candidates for internships.
- Students are carefully screened, evaluated before placement.
- Programs introduce students to the workplace in a step-wise, planned manner to build the personal and academic skills necessary for success.
- Clear guidelines and procedures exist for the evaluation of student workers, remediation of work-related problems, and transfer or termination.
- Students are under the ultimate supervision of a certified, trained educator as required by state law and district policy.
- Employers are recognized and celebrated in the community.
- Schools and employers pay explicit attention to the cultural differences between educational and business institutions.

Special Legal Considerations for High School Internships

Because high school students are usually legal minors, there are legal precautions for any program that involves students in the workplace. (Wilcox).

- Compliance with federal, state and local laws governing student workers and the background checking of adults who work with students in school sponsored programs.
- All procedures for review, remediation and termination conform to appropriate laws governing student workers and school sponsored programs.
- Programs comply with state workers' compensation laws and all other related risk-management rules and regulations.
- Students are prepared for handling sensitive or confidential information that they may encounter, workplace rules regarding racial, gender and other forms of discrimination, drug and alcohol policies, and all other workplace policies.

Online Resources:

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<http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/2006pubs/06V19StudentsCantWait.asp>



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Research Brief

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