Building Bridges with Industry

Integrating Career-Connected Learning into Out-of-School Time

A playbook for
out-of-school-time
education leaders

STEM NEXT
OPPORTUNITY FUND

Introduction:

Meeting the Moment

This is a moment of both urgency and possibility. Young people face a rapidly evolving job market that demands new skills, adaptability, and career navigation strategies. **The out-of-school time (OST) field is uniquely positioned to help young people tackle this changing landscape** by expanding and strengthening opportunities beyond the school day for career awareness, exploration, and preparation.

OST and industry are natural allies in this work. Together, OST and industry can open doors to career awareness, exploration, and preparation in ways that are hands-on, engaging, and aligned with both youth and industry needs.

Over 65 percent of today's students will eventually work in careers that don't yet exist. They'll likely move through not just multiple jobs, but multiple careers. And while talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. By focusing on **Career-Connected Learning**—especially in fast-growing, high-wage STEM sectors—OST leaders and industry partners can enhance what's possible for young people in their communities and states.

The Career-Connected Learning (CCL) Framework

Career-Connected Learning: A Framework for Out-of-School Time Providers, developed by the STEM Next Opportunity Fund, offers a clear roadmap for OST providers. The Framework outlines three core stages—Career Awareness, Career Exploration, and Career Preparation—supported by foundational strategies that define the What, Why, Who, and How of high-quality CCL experiences from elementary through high school.

Why Career-Connected Learning in OST Matters Now

This Playbook was created to help **out-of-school-time education leaders** meet this moment with purpose and clarity. Built around the strengths of the OST sector—partnerships, quality, and advocacy—this Playbook will help state afterschool networks expand their impact by providing strategic guidance, ready-to-use tools, case examples, and practical tips to help build bridges with industry to integrate high-quality CCL into OST at scale.

OST is a key piece of your state's broader **career navigation ecosystem**, working alongside educators, employers, intermediaries, families, and community leaders to prepare youth for what's ahead. You may already have experience working with employers, or you may just be getting started. Wherever you are, you belong in this work.

Afterschool and summer programs are ideal environments to prepare tomorrow's STEM workforce. When youth have the space, flexibility, and time to build durable skills like communication and teamwork that can be applied to real-world situations across the STEM disciplines, they are more likely to experience an increase in motivation and engagement in that particular activity:

80%
of OST participants report stronger knowledge of STEM careers.

73%
report a more positive STEM identity—a key predictor of pursuing careers in STEM

Whether you're ready to lead, support, or strengthen employer engagement, this playbook will help you build the systems and relationships to connect more young people to opportunities and a future they can envision for themselves.

Jobs for the Future

The Building Bridges to Industry playbook was developed in partnership with Jobs for the Future (JFF), an organization dedicated to transforming U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. It grew from JFF's co-leadership of communities of practice convened by STEM Next with out-of-school time (OST) leaders, whose insights underscored the need for a practical guide to initiate and sustain employer partnerships for OST career-connected learning.

→ Learn more about JFF at www.jff.org

The Value Proposition

Industry—from public and private sector employers to unions, workforce boards, and industry associations—is an essential ally in delivering high-quality CCL experiences. When OST and industry work together, youth gain access to real-world opportunities that help them build awareness, explore career paths, and begin preparing for meaningful futures. And the goal isn't just any job; it's a quality job that offers not just a paycheck, but flexibility, autonomy, stability, and advancement opportunities. [1]

Value Proposition: At-a-Glance

For Networks:

- Greater alignment with state workforce and education priorities.
- Enhanced credibility and visibility.
- New pathways to sustainability.

For Programs and Communities:

- Stronger programming rooted in the CCL Framework.
- Boosted reputation.
- Improved youth outcomes and community ties.

For Employers:

- A direct line to the next generation of talent.
- Improved brand reputation through community impact.
- Stronger employee satisfaction and retention.

For Young People:

- Exposure. Guidance. Access.
- A chance to learn about STEM, through, and at work, and to imagine a future that feels possible.

1 Impact Employer Model | Jobs for the Future

Section One
How to Get Started

SECTION ONE COVERS

- Play to Your Strengths: Partnership, Quality, Advocacy
- Plan and Integrate
- Build Internal Capacity
- Tools: Career-Connected Learning Framework, Readiness Assessment, and Engaging Employers Quick Work Plan

Getting employers to participate in OST programs can be a challenge, especially when such partnerships are still relatively new and untested. Also, the perceived costs and resources needed to develop CCL experiences for youth can make employers hesitant. Challenges range from convincing employers to invest time and resources in career exploration experiences to demonstrating the value of partnering with the OST field.

These recommendations and strategies will help address these challenges and engage employer partners.

1. Play to Your Strengths: Partnership, Quality, Advocacy

Partnership

Show industry partners how OST programs work so they can see where to contribute—through short-term CCL opportunities and longer-term efforts to build career pipelines.

Quality

Demonstrate your commitment to quality by highlighting the standards, staff competencies, assessment tools, and improvement systems your network uses to support effective programming.

Highlight the return on investment by helping employers see how OST efforts align with their interest in effective workforce preparation.
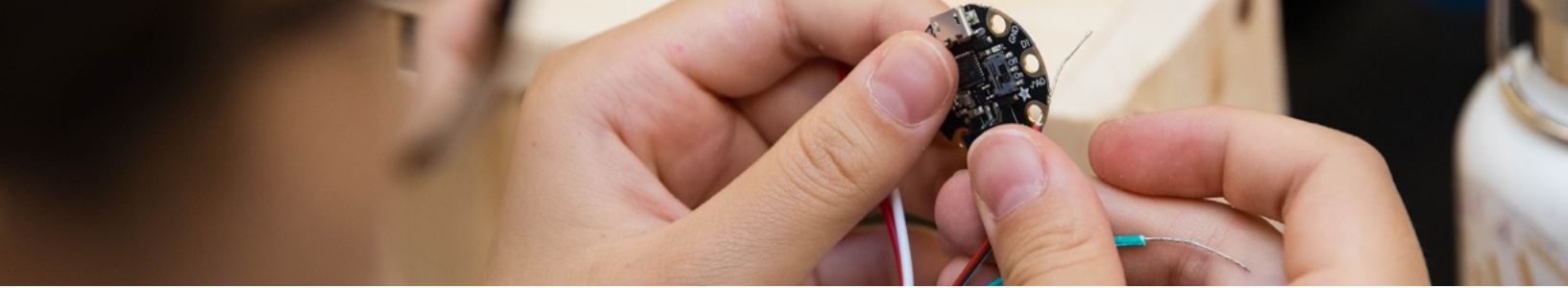
Advocacy

Illustrate your policy impact by demonstrating how your network helps shape statewide policies that sustain and expand OST programming.

Position your network as a strategic ally by emphasizing your experience engaging policymakers across levels of government.

2. Plan and Integrate

Assess Readiness

Identify existing strengths and constraints—such as staff time, funding, and relationships— through a quick pulse check or formal readiness assessment.

Do a readiness assessment. This tool will help you identify your strengths and areas for development (an important step in setting realistic goals) and choose the most appropriate strategies from this playbook.

Set Strategic, Integrated Goals

Define a clear, primary goal for employer engagement aligned with your broader organizational objectives (e.g., brokering relationships, launching pilots, advocating for CCL).

Integrate CCL work into existing plans so that employer engagement becomes a means to advance—not distract from—your core mission.

Clarify your role, whether as a connector, advocate, pilot site, or clearinghouse, to focus efforts and communicate effectively with staff and partners.

Engage Staff in the Process

Encourage staff to share what they do and don't know about CCL and employer engagement.

Gauge team expertise and needs to determine staff strengths and where additional support or professional learning may be needed.

Leverage Existing Resources

Repurpose existing tools and systems (e.g., communications assets, partnership databases) to reduce duplication and streamline efforts.

Track employer interactions using your existing partnership management system to differentiate outreach, funding, and engagement roles.

> **TIP:**
>
> Use a planning tool, such as this Engaging Employers Quick Work Plan, to establish a clear primary goal, objectives, outcomes, timeline, budget, and roles. The CCL Framework will help you identify tactics and outcomes to propose to employers. See a Sample Action Plan from a statewide network.

3. Build Internal Capacity

Facilitate Professional Learning

Encourage staff to complete CCL training to boost confidence and credibility when engaging industry partners.

Review and discuss the Career-Connected Learning Framework from STEM Next to build understanding and consistent messaging around CCL.

Promote the MOST Network's Career and College Readiness Online Courses as a free, OST-specific resource to build staff capacity across age groups.

Build Employer Awareness

Attend employer-facing events such as industry association meetings, workforce board gatherings, and chamber of commerce events to hear directly from employers and expand your network.

Learn how employers talk about workforce development to better align your language, approach, and partnership pitch.

Engage Program Partners

Survey OST program partners to understand their current employer engagement efforts, interests, and needs.

Create a program partner advisory group to develop strategy, share lessons learned, and potentially pilot new employer engagement approaches.

Leverage partner insights to identify what has worked, what hasn't, and where network-level support can have the most impact.

Missouri Afterschool Network

In Missouri, the statewide afterschool network recognized that credibility with employers begins with presence and persistence. Staff made a point of attending workforce meetings, Chamber of Commerce events, and career and technical education gatherings, even when they did not have a formal role. These regular interactions created opportunities to explain the value of afterschool in preparing young people for the workforce.

Over time, industry leaders began to view afterschool not only as a setting for enrichment but as an essential partner for building career pathways. This groundwork led to the development of new initiatives, such as the Missouri Manufacturing Academy, which provides middle and high school students with hands-on career exploration opportunities. Similar models are being expanded into healthcare and other industries.

The lesson is clear: By showing up, listening, and consistently framing afterschool as a workforce partner, Missouri positioned itself to secure industry partners and funding streams that continue to sustain and expand career-connected learning.

Section Two

How to Identify and Initiate Industry Relationships

SECTION TWO COVERS

- Identify Employer Partners
- Strategic Outreach
- When You Hear 'No'

- Tools: Sample Employer Engagement Survey, Sample Sponsorship Plan, Sample Scripts for Engaging Employers
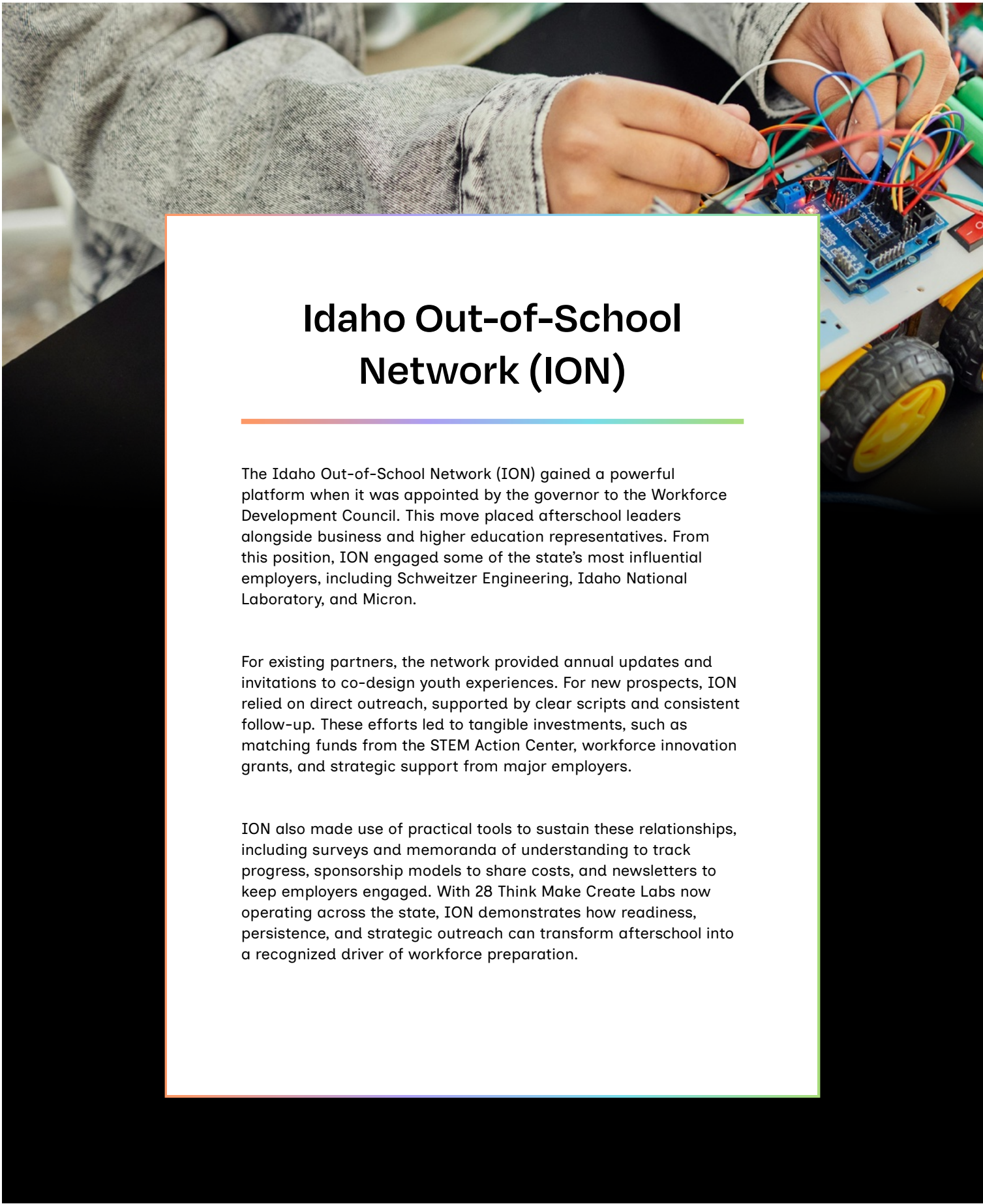
Now that you have a handle on your network's readiness, a clear goal or set of goals for building bridges with industry, and some understanding of CCL, it's time to identify potential partners and then craft a strategy for initiating a relationship.

1. Identify Employer Partners

The following strategies may seem like a step-by-step process. In reality, some steps may happen simultaneously or in different orders depending on a variety of factors, including the employer landscape, existing relationships, and available resources.

→ Think broadly about potential partners.

Remember, industry refers to a wide range of public and private sector partners, including businesses, government agencies, workforce boards, labor unions, employer alliances, and trade associations. The table below highlights options to help your network avoid tunnel vision. Limiting your efforts to just the obvious employers (e.g., the local bank, a law firm, a big-name brand) will result in your network missing out on some other potentially fruitful partnerships, such as chambers, councils, boards, and associations.

Idaho Out-of-School Network (ION)

The Idaho Out-of-School Network (ION) gained a powerful platform when it was appointed by the governor to the Workforce Development Council. This move placed afterschool leaders alongside business and higher education representatives. From this position, ION engaged some of the state's most influential employers, including Schweitzer Engineering, Idaho National Laboratory, and Micron.

For existing partners, the network provided annual updates and invitations to co-design youth experiences. For new prospects, ION relied on direct outreach, supported by clear scripts and consistent follow-up. These efforts led to tangible investments, such as matching funds from the STEM Action Center, workforce innovation grants, and strategic support from major employers.

ION also made use of practical tools to sustain these relationships, including surveys and memoranda of understanding to track progress, sponsorship models to share costs, and newsletters to keep employers engaged. With 28 Think Make Create Labs now operating across the state, ION demonstrates how readiness, persistence, and strategic outreach can transform afterschool into a recognized driver of workforce preparation.

→ Gather and compare youth voice and labor market information (LMI).

Another helpful step is to tap your program partners to get their youth participants to assess and reflect upon their career interests. Of course, the careers identified by young people will not always align with available employers or industries in your state or region. That's where LMI comes in. Look for intersections between the interests of youth and the data to find the sweet spot.

❯ **Youth voice:** Request that OST program staff in your network use interest awareness activities, such as self-assessments and career interest inventories, coupled with guided reflection to gain insight into students' emerging career interests. (See resources in the Toolkit.)

❯ **LMI:** Use online tools and/or local workforce partners (see table below) to identify employers and industries with quality jobs—those with projected job growth, living wage compensation and benefits, and career pathways. (See resources in the Toolkit.)

❯ **TIP:**

Build relationships with workforce partners (chambers, boards, and councils) that collect and analyze LMI. You may turn to them for help with contacts at specific businesses later.

North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs

In North Carolina, years of hands-on STEM programming created a natural springboard for industry engagement. The statewide network reconvened its STEM Coalition, gathering partners from across education, industry, and youth-serving organizations, including Wolf Speed, Epic Games, Boys and Girls Clubs, Moorhead Planetarium, and the state education agency. Many employers had never considered afterschool as a workforce development partner, and the coalition helped bridge that gap by demonstrating how afterschool hours could be used for career exposure.

The result of the coalition was the creation of North Carolina's After School Industry Partnership Playbook, a resource that provides templates, outreach trackers, checklists, and sample memoranda of understanding to make partnerships easier for both employers and providers. Early adopters, including summer camps and community programs with career-focused tracks, are now piloting partnerships with employers. For industries with urgent talent needs, such as the energy sector, the Playbook offers a ready-made framework for collaboration. North Carolina's experience shows how networks can deepen industry relationships by moving from informal awareness to structured, statewide strategies.

→ Tap your existing circle of contacts.

If you have already compared youth voice with LMI, use those insights to decide where to begin. Remember to think broadly. Many networks overlap, and you may have more connections than you realize.

❱ **Start with your own OST network!** Which employer contacts are in the database, including corporate funders and employers that sit on the Board of Directors? Consider opportunities to engage funders and board members of your organization in expanding their involvement to include CCL activities.

❱ **Ask friends, family, and neighbors** to tell you about their places of employment and, if possible, facilitate an introduction for you.

❱ **Explore LinkedIn** for potential employer partners in your online network. Make sure your own personal profile provides helpful information about your network.[2]

→ Be intentional about size and proximity.

Large national or state employers may have more capacity and resources, while small- to medium-sized employers can be easier to engage over shared connections to communities.

❱ **Small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs):** SMBs (fewer than 500 employees) create the majority of new jobs. They are key drivers of local and regional economies and are often more approachable and nimbler than large corporations. Partnerships with SMBs can offer creative, flexible opportunities—especially through personal connections, family-owned businesses, alumni networks, or local chambers of commerce. Local employers may even have their own children or employees with children in the local school system and/or OST programs. However, smaller teams and tighter budgets may limit SMBs' capacity to engage deeply. [3]

❱ **Large businesses:** Large companies (more than 500 employees) often have dedicated staff for partnerships and corporate social responsibility. They can bring substantial resources and visibility to your program. However, accessing the right decision-maker at a large company can be challenging, and large corporations often receive many competing requests.

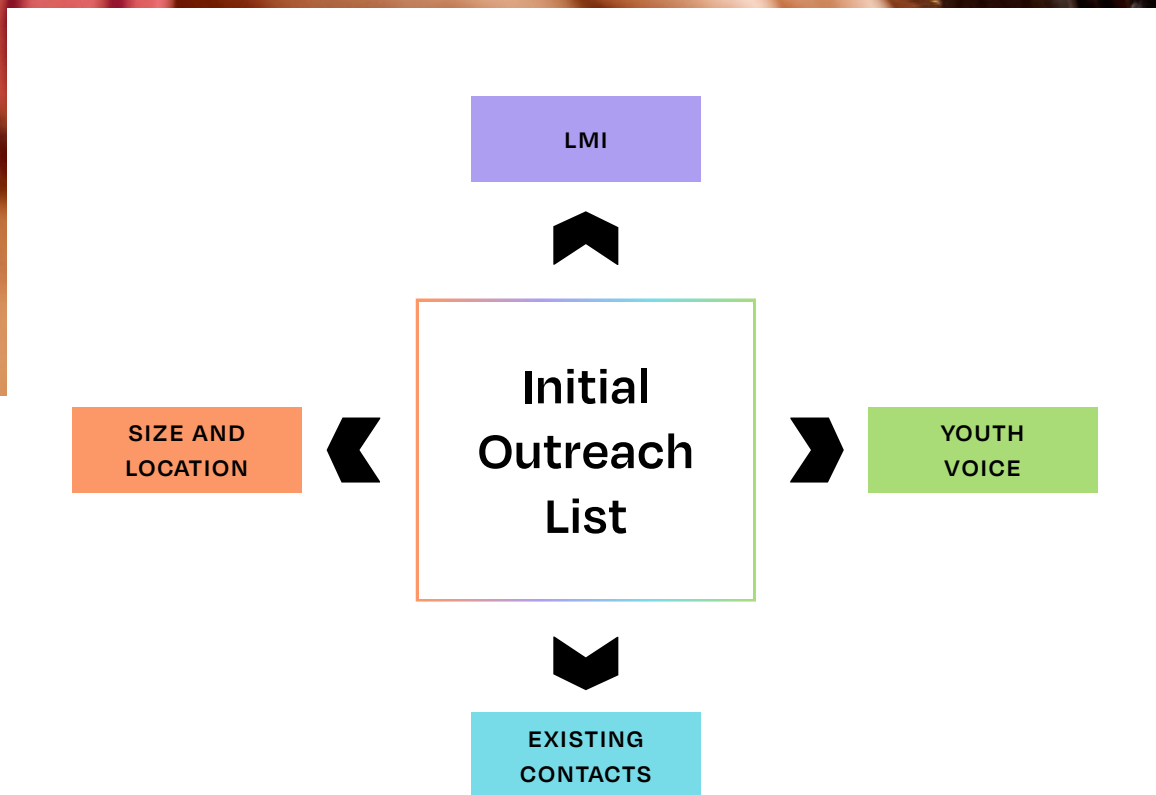2 Reimagining Employer Engagement: A Toolkit for Providers (pg. 6) | Reimagine Retail Chicagoland

3 Rework America Alliance Small and Medium-sized Business Engagement: Lessons Learned and Vision for the Future | Jobs for the Future

Workforce Partners

Partner Type	Description
Chambers of Commerce	Local chambers of commerce are especially helpful if you are focusing on local businesses. Chambers often collect a range of information from employers, including what skills matter most to them and what kinds of career exploration or CCL activities they're interested in supporting.
Industry associations	Almost every industry has a trade association—a great source for finding valuable information about industry trends, identifying experts, and speaking with potential contacts.
Young professional associations	These local groups gather early-career individuals with similar professions or interests to promote and support their career development, education, and industry-related activities. Young professional associations often invite members to volunteer with local organizations, so they are often a good source for volunteers. Young professionals tend to have more time and energy to devote to volunteering, and such experiences are good additions to slender résumés. Find these associations online, using "young professional association" as a search term, along with specific geography and/or industry. [4]
Workforce development boards and councils	These boards or councils have broad representation. As instructed by the Department of Labor, more than 50 percent of members must come from the business community. In addition, Workforce development boards and councils are required to have representation from local community colleges, other training providers, elected officials, and workforce program leaders.[7] By joining their state workforce development council, afterschool networks can position themselves as key partners in developing the workforce of the future and ensure that more young people are equipped with the skills and experiences they need to succeed.
STEM Learning Ecosystems and STEM Hubs	These networks of local organizations have broad representation, with members from education, the private sector, community-based organizations, and STEM-based institutions, such as museums, science centers, and professional organizations. In addition to providing high-quality STEM experiences for young people, these ecosystems address STEM workforce development and therefore attract support from business and industry.
Student groups at universities, community colleges, trade schools, and technical colleges	Students from these groups can make good guest speakers because they are near-age peers to afterschool participants and have valuable and recently acquired knowledge about education pathways. Once these students graduate, they are potential champions for your program with their employer.
Afterschool Networks	A nationwide afterschool network brings together a wide range of partners from education, workforce, state government, community-based organizations, and more to develop a common vision ensuring that young people can access the opportunities they need to thrive, succeed in school today, and be prepared for future jobs, college, and life. The 50 State Afterschool Network is an ecosystem of practitioners, researchers, technical assistance providers and afterschool champions, working to expand the quality, scope, and impact of learning experiences for young people across the country.

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4 Examples include: National FFA Organization; DECA Inc.; NAE4-HYDP; The Professional Association; SWE Early Career Professionals AG; Young Technical Professionals | National Society of Black Engineers; and SHPE

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┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
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Overall, weighing youth voice, LMI, your circles of contact, and organization size and proximity will help you arrive at an outreach list.

2. Strategic Outreach

Follow these tips for determining your outreach strategy. Remember, your list may include specific target employers or industry sectors, such as information technology, healthcare, arts, media and entertainment, hospitality, tourism, etc.

→ Research the employer or industry so you understand its values and goals.

Before reaching out to an employer, research the company, business, or industry area. Understanding an employer's or industry's mission, values, and priorities will help you tailor your outreach and identify areas of shared interest. The more aligned your "ask" is with their goals, the more likely industry groups are to engage. Examples of common industry values include customer experience, safety and security, innovation, and adaptability.

❱ **TIP:**

Especially if you have an existing relationship or contact, consider using a brief online survey to help identify employer/industry goals, interests, and capacity in connection to CCL. See a sample Employer Engagement Survey.

→ Build a clear case for partnership.

❱ **Be explicit** about what you're asking for from the beginning. What exactly are you requesting? Being clear and intentional will make your outreach more effective and respectful of employers' time and capacity.

❱ **Be prepared** to discuss your network's strengths and what it can offer the employer. Be sure that your messaging positions your organization as a knowledgeable, trusted leader and partner in the state and/or community.

❱ **Forgo nonprofit jargon** in favor of employer-friendly language. For example, avoid the term, "21st century or employability skills," which the nonprofit sector tends to use. To resonate with employers, be specific about young people gaining skills for customer-service, teamwork, time management, etc.[5]

❱ **Flip the narrative** to start with the benefit of CCL on a company's bottom line. There are many benefits for employers that may resonate especially with human resources or talent managers who are concerned with employee retention, productivity, and satisfaction. Afterschool programs have been proven to keep kids safe, increase academic success, and help working families. What does all that do for the business community? Plenty.

FOR EXAMPLE

Supporting OST programs can improve hiring and retention. Companies that support volunteerism in the community build goodwill, generate positive publicity, create branding opportunities, and increase employee satisfaction, which is linked to higher retention.[6] A study from the University of Vermont showed that jobseekers were more interested in working for companies with employee volunteering programs.[7]

❱ **TIP:**

Clear asks can be packaged in different ways. See these two examples:

- Sample Sponsorship Plan from the Idaho Out-of-School Network that gives employers interested in sponsorships a clear understanding of the options at different price ranges.

- Employer Engagement Menu, a menu of à la carte options.

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5 Reimagining Employer Engagement: A Toolkit for Providers | Reimagine Retail Chicagoland
6 Corporate Volunteerism Statistics For Companies | Galaxy Digital
7 ibid

At-a-Glance: Framing Your Ask

Be specific and clear. Clearly state what you are asking for. What are you requesting? Why now? Get employers' attention with something that makes you attractive and unique.[8]

Be flexible. Offer options for participation and acknowledge different levels of availability and capacity.

Align with employer interests. Connect your request to their goals, such as community engagement, future workforce development, etc..

- **DON'T** describe how the employer can help you or help fulfill your mission.
- **DO** describe the value and benefit you can bring to the employer and how you are a solution to their needs. [9]

→ **Find a connection (AKA a warm intro).**

Conducting outreach can take considerable time, particularly when it involves cold calling. Cold calling is an acceptable approach, but not the most effective.

Begin by determining the best entry points for making contact. Go back to your circle of contacts and ask for "warm" introductions to potential employer partners and/or networking or visibility opportunities, such as attending a routine industry meeting.

→ **Take advantage of the multiple ways to contact businesses.**

If you don't have a specific person to contact or don't hear back from the contact you have, consider the following array of entry points. Keep in mind that small businesses might have few to no people in these roles. In those cases, go straight to operations staff, managers, or even the business owners themselves.

- **Human resources department:** One of the responsibilities of a human resources department is to optimize the contributions of individuals and teams. [10] HR may be open to partnership opportunities that will attract candidates and increase employee satisfaction.

- **Hiring managers** are often looking for ways to make the business stand out as a great place to work.

- **Office of Corporate Social Responsibility:** For many companies, an OST STEM focus could be a fit for the philanthropic and volunteer priorities of a business.

- **Employee resource groups:** Jobs for the Future says that employee resource groups are spaces for employees to connect with others who have shared identities, life experiences, or interests. For employees, resource groups provide support, enhance career development, and bolster personal development. [11] Look for groups that align with your mission or target your program's populations.

TIP:

Review How to Initiate a New Employer Relationship, which includes phrases to hook employers such as, "Our mission aligns with your values..." [12]

8 Reimagining Employer Engagement: A Toolkit for Providers | Reimagine Retail Chicagoland
9 ibid
10 What Is Human Resources? The Ultimate Guide | Forbes Advisor
11 A Blueprint for Amplifying Worker Voice | Jobs for the Future
12 The Advokit: A Toolkit to Create Strong Employer Partnerships and Push for Inclusive Change | Cara Collective

Beyond School Bells (Nebraska)

In Nebraska, the statewide afterschool network Beyond School Bells has built workforce pathways by piloting a near peer model in which high school students lead STEM activities for younger youth, supported by mentorship from college students. This model provides multiple benefits: Younger youth gain engaging STEM experiences, older students develop leadership skills and career awareness, and employers are introduced to a pipeline of talent.

However, sustaining and scaling this work requires more than strong program design. The network had to solve fundamental questions about capacity, such as how to compensate youth workers, how to align employer opportunities with student interests, and how to ensure that administrative and logistical systems were strong enough to support employer partnerships long-term.

That foundation positioned Nebraska to benefit from a new wave of investment through the Exploring Career Connections in STEM (EC^2) Initiative, supported by a $3.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Youth Workforce Pathways program. For Nebraska, this represented a breakthrough—workforce funding from a federal agency not traditionally connected to afterschool. With EC^2, Beyond School Bells can expand career-connected learning opportunities in rural and underserved communities, aligning afterschool with state economic priorities in sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, and biotech. This infusion of federal and philanthropic resources is not only bringing new employer partners to the table but also strengthening the network's long-term sustainability.

Nebraska's experience demonstrates that investing in organizational capacity can prepare networks to take advantage of nontraditional funding sources and create durable systems that link out-of-school time to workforce development.

3. What to Do When You're Told, "No"

Every contact you have represents an opportunity, even when they don't say yes to your proposal. Your contact may say no if he or she does not have the power to make such a decision or works in an area of the business that's not a good fit. Always ask if there is another person in the company you can talk to or if they know of another company that might be interested. Then, get the names and ask for an introduction.

→ Sample Scripts for Engaging Employers

When reaching out to employers, a clear and well-crafted message can make all the difference. Whether you are inviting an employer to host a tour, speak to youth, sponsor an event, or explore a partnership, use language that is direct, professional, and aligned with their values. Use these templates as a starting point. Then, personalize your messages to reflect your program's mission, the youth you serve, and the employer's interests.

> ❱ [Sample Letter to Potential Sponsors](#)
> ❱ [Sample Employer Engagement Email](#) (pg. 37)
> ❱ [Elevator Pitch Tool](#) (pg. 25)
> ❱ [Sample Letter/Phone Script](#) (pg. 9)

Section Three
How to Deepen Industry Relationships

Your goal is to develop lasting relationships with industry.

Remember that relationships wax and wane, often due to external forces such as the economy. Some employers may only have the bandwidth to partner as a one-time or periodic sponsor of an event. Others may find mutual benefit in sending employee volunteers as guest speakers or to a career fair.

Over time, some may be willing to go deeper by providing mentors or internship opportunities or co-advocating for policies that increase resources for afterschool programming to promote career awareness, exploration, and preparation in industries lacking adequate worker pipelines.

1. Start Off Strong

All the planning, preparation, and strategic outreach has paid off and your network has an industry partner ready for collaboration. Now what? Follow these recommendations to start off strong.

→ Give employers what they need to be successful.

> ❱ **Provide an information or training session** to educate employers about the activity options and fundamentals of effective CCL.

> ❱ **Share resources that help employers be successful**, especially if they'll be interacting directly with youth. For example, this Presentation Template for Guest Speakers gives employer guest speakers what they need to prepare youth-friendly presentations, and this handout provides tips on presenting to teens.

> ❱ **Consider engaging employers in program design** to give them an even stronger sense of ownership and a concrete understanding of how they're adding complementary value that wouldn't be possible otherwise. For example, employers can identify the skill sets most important to their industry or provide real-world examples of tasks or problem-solving their workers undertake that can be adapted for youth.

→ Offer to begin with a pilot

to build foundational trust, demonstrate value, and model how refinements can be made based on initial learnings and outcomes. Many partnerships begin with pilot programs or short-term engagement with the understanding that there is potential for growth.

→ Confirm partnership parameters and expectations.

Clearly articulate the partnership in writing to avoid confusion, align expectations, and establish accountability for both OST programs and employer partners.

> ❱ **Set measurable and realistic goals**, the desired outcomes, and how and when they'll be measured.

> ❱ **Confirm branding** and/or recognition agreements.

> ❱ **Establish a clear point of contact and norms** for working together, including a regular communication cadence. It's important to check in with your partner periodically even when there aren't pressing activities.

❱ **TIP:**

Employers may be reluctant to sign a formal contract until there is an established working relationship and it's clear that the partnership will extend beyond a single engagement. Start with simple documents such as FAQ and tip sheets that can lay the groundwork for more formal partnership agreements, such as memoranda of understanding or contracts, as trust and working relationships develop.

Strategies for Promoting Sponsors and Supporters

In return for sponsoring an event or program, offer ways to increase your industry partner's exposure within the community. Lights on Afterschool shares 32 ideas to increase exposure, ranging from branding logos on clothing to media materials—like these sample media advisories and press releases.

2. Cultivate the Relationship

Being both proactive and responsive to employer needs is the key to cultivating the partner relationship.

→ Ensure that the relationship is mutually beneficial and doesn't feel purely transactional.

❯ Foster a "dual client" approach that demonstrates value to both young people and employers.

❯ Periodically ask your partners if the partnership is still meeting their expectations.

→ Give employers the opportunity to consider whether to expand to new areas or stay the course.

❯ This easy-to-use form clearly lays out short- and long-term engagement opportunities.

→ Create opportunities for feedback.

❯ Structured feedback is crucial for continuous improvement and relationship cultivation.

❯ Provide opportunities for employers to provide feedback through surveys, informal check-ins, and formal debriefing sessions following events or program milestones.

❯ Document and share compelling success stories and impact narratives to reinforce partnership value, inspire continued investment, and motivate broader community engagement.

❯ Make improvements based on employer feedback and student impact data. See this Career Foundations Youth Survey developed by the Vermont Afterschool Network. Move from one-off programs and events to ongoing commitments (ideally codified in a partnership agreement).

Employer Engagement Tool

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Stage of Relationship				
Initial Contact / New Relationship	Establishing Trust and Credibility	Working Relationship	Trusted Provider and Collaborator	Full Strategic Partner
Stage Focus				
Advising	Capacity Building	Co-Designing	Convening	Leading
Examples of Activities				
• Discuss hiring needs, skills, and competencies • Advise on curricula • Contract training • Hire graduates	• Job site tours • Speakers • Mock interviews • Internships • Conduct needs assessment • Loan/donate equipment • Recruiting	• Curriculum and pathway development • Adjunct faculty and instructors	• College-Employer sector partnership	• Multi-Employer • Multi-College partnerships

3. Maintain Employer Relationships

Maintaining employer relationships can come down to maintaining your organization's strong reputation by:

→ Consistently delivering quality experiences.

→ Responding swiftly to concerns.

→ Communicating proactively.

In addition to consistent delivery and communication, it's important to **educate or re-educate industry partners about the need for and value of afterschool**. What may feel obvious to you could be entirely new to your employer partners. For example, Corporate Voices for Working Families [13] lays out a compelling case that helps frame the urgency and importance of OST:

→ Supply and demand:
There are not enough afterschool programs to meet the needs of families and communities.

→ Proof of impact:
Evaluations have shown that afterschool programs yield many positive outcomes and are essential to preparing young people for the future.

By reinforcing this message and continuing to show the broader impact of employer-supported OST initiatives, you deepen the value of the relationship and ensure sustained engagement over time.

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13 Business-to-Business Toolkit: Fostering Business Engagement in Afterschool Programs and Policies | Afterschool Alliance

Funding & Capacity Building

SECTION FOUR COVERS

- Funding Employer Engagement and Building Capacity
- Identify and Secure Funding Sources
- Funding Cheat Sheet: Where to Look

Funding opportunities will vary in scope and duration. Some may provide short-term project support through grants or one-time corporate sponsorships. Others may involve ongoing partnerships with workforce boards or educational institutions that contribute resources and expertise over multiple program cycles. Over time, certain funders may be willing to go deeper by establishing multi-year commitments, co-funding collaborative initiatives, or advocating for policy changes that increase sustainable funding streams for employer engagement in OST programming. Although the funding landscape will shift due to economic conditions and policy priorities, the overall goal is to develop diversified, reliable funding portfolios that support long-term employer engagement capacity.

Funding Employer Engagement and Building Capacity

Securing funding is essential for sustaining employer engagement efforts and building a strong, lasting network of industry partners. As a state network, you have likely done a great deal of work to secure funding. By securing funding, the OST programs in your network can provide career-connected learning opportunities in partnership with and supported by employers. Below are key strategies for sourcing funding.

1. Identify and Secure Funding Sources

→ Grants:
  Seek grants that support workforce development, career exploration,
  or youth engagement.

→ Corporate sponsorships:
  Engage local and regional businesses by offering opportunities for them to connect
  with the workforce of the future while fulfilling corporate social responsibility goals.

→ Partnerships:
  Leverage relationships with workforce boards, industry associations, and
  educational institutions, many of which may have funding available or
  resources they can contribute to employer engagement initiatives.

→ Co-funding opportunities:
  Collaborate with state networks or other program partners to pool resources for
  employer engagement activities, increasing the scope and impact of your work.

2. Funding Cheat Sheet: Where to Look

→ Federal:

  • Department of Labor: Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act
  • Department of Health and Human Services: Temporary Assistance for
    Needy Families
  • Department of Education: Perkins V (Career and Technical Education)
  • Department of Agriculture: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
  • Department of Transportation and Department of Energy: Infrastructure
    Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act

→ State and Local:

  • Community impact and improvement organizations and community
    development corporations
  • Violence intervention and prevention organizations
  • Workforce boards and industry advisory councils
  • Chambers of commerce
  • Departments of commerce
  • Economic and/or business development offices

→ Other Sources:

  • Foundations
  • Corporate social responsibility programs
  • Industry associations
  • Other state networks (co-funding opportunities)

Section Five

Developing and Sustaining a Network of OST Champions

Champions contribute in many ways, from offering occasional support to taking on long-term leadership roles. Some may begin with simple actions, such as sharing program news within their networks or giving a testimonial when asked. Others may dive in more deeply, serving as mentors, joining advisory boards, or acting as ambassadors who regularly promote OST initiatives. The most committed champions may eventually help shape strategy or advocate for broader changes that strengthen ties between the OST field and industry. A champion's involvement is personal, so the level of engagement will naturally fluctuate. The ultimate aim is to cultivate a community of advocates whose energy, credibility, and sustained presence drive momentum for employer engagement.

Building a network of champions is key to sustaining and growing employer engagement initiatives. As a state network, you likely already have established OST champions. Continuing to build this network of champions will prove essential to your success.

These champions include the following types:

→ Internal champions:
Designate individuals within your organization who are passionate about employer engagement. Provide them with leadership opportunities and the necessary tools to take ownership of employer outreach efforts, ensuring sustainability even as personnel change.

→ Employer champions:
Identify key employers who are committed to the mission of your program. These champions can advocate for your program to other businesses and provide testimonials or success stories to showcase the value of partnership.

→ Youth and alumni champions:
Engage program alumni who have benefited from employer partnerships to act as advocates. Their success stories can help bring new employers on board and highlight the program's impact.
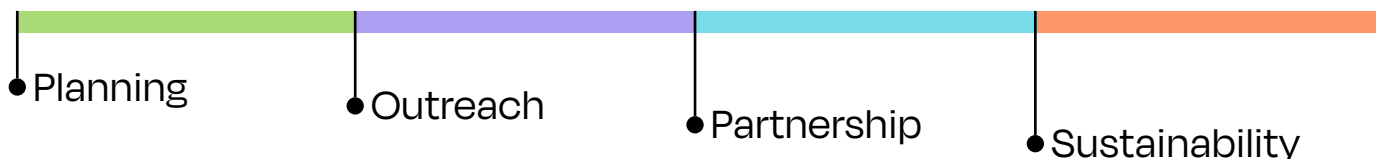
Pulling It All Together

Networks move at different speeds when implementing employer engagement. Some start small, piloting programs that test basic concepts. Others jump in with multiple strategies simultaneously, moving quickly from planning to outreach to partnership-building. The most ambitious networks may eventually create comprehensive systems that integrate employer engagement into every part of their organization. Each network's approach will reflect its capacity and local context, but the goal is the same: to build sustainable, systematic practices that transform early experiments into core competencies.

Next Steps for Networks

→ **Planning:**
Clearly articulate goals, define roles and responsibilities, establish realistic timelines, and ensure organizational buy-in.

→ **Outreach:**
Cultivate relationships through ongoing communication, demonstrating responsiveness to feedback and sharing regular updates about partnership successes and impact.

→ **Partnership:**
Formalize partnerships through clear, documented agreements, regular check-ins, and clearly defined mutual expectations.

→ **Sustainability:**
Employ targeted, personalized communications to strategically engage potential employer partners, utilizing warm introductions and clearly defined partnership benefits.

Timeline View:

Planning

Outreach

Partnership

Sustainability

Simplified Guide Summary Table

Stage	Key Actions	Tools
Planning	Goal-setting, role clarification	Interactive Planning Worksheet **Examples:** • Action Planning Worksheet and Template • Engaging Employers and Workplace Partners Quick Workplan
Outreach	Strategic employer engagement	Customizable Outreach Templates **Examples:** • Sample Letter to Potential Sponsors • Employer Engagement Action Plan • Strategic Employer Engagement Guide • How to Engage Employers: A Guide for Schools and Colleges
Partnership	Clear agreements, expectation management	Partnership Agreements **Examples:** • Employer Workplace Tour Fact Sheet • Workplace Tour Fact Sheet • Employer Workplace Tour Tip Sheet
Sustainability	Regular communication, structured feedback	Surveys, Impact Stories **Examples:** • Career Foundations Youth Survey • The Common Instrument Suite • Career-Connected Summer

❯ Time-Saving Tips:

→ Begin with small-scale pilot programs to test concepts and refine practices.

→ Clearly define roles, responsibilities, and expectations upfront.

→ Regularly communicate successes, challenges, and updates to maintain engagement.

→ Use simple, standardized documents to enhance clarity and consistency.

→ Proactively address potential employer concerns, such as liability and resource demands.

Adhering to these structured guidelines promotes the development of successful, enduring partnerships, enhancing robust career exploration opportunities for youth.

Appendix

Updated "Living" Career Exploration Toolkit

Our Mission

Making out-of-school STEM opportunities a reality for millions of young people to help them thrive in STEM and beyond.

STEM NEXT
OPPORTUNITY FUND

Learn More

stemnext.org →