Workforce Council of Southwest Ohio

# Position Paper: Strengthening Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship Pathways in Southwest Ohio

## Introduction

According to ApprenticeOhio, Hamilton County currently has 35 sponsors working with 2,785 apprentices in industries such as construction, healthcare, and manufacturing. Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs are proven workforce tools that combine paid, on-the-job training with classroom instruction.[5] Research shows these earn-and-learn models increase employment retention and raise lifetime earnings relative to comparable non-participants – making them powerful engines for both worker mobility and employer pipeline development.

On September 26, 2025, Easterseals Redwood and the Workforce Council of Southwest Ohio held an Apprenticeships Briefing for elected officials and stakeholders to build understanding of the apprenticeship landscape in Southwest Ohio and to hear directly from employers, educators, and apprentices the opportunities and challenges they face in creating and sustaining successful apprenticeship programs.

Expanding these pathways in Southwest Ohio will require targeted policy changes, employer incentives, and stronger school-to-work partnerships. [1]

## Key findings

### Earnings & returns

Multiple evaluations have found that apprentices experience faster earnings growth and substantial lifetime gains; one synthesis estimated that program completers gained nearly six-figure lifetime earnings advantages over similar non-participants. Federal and academic analyses consistently find positive wage growth and strong retention after completion. [2] [4]

### Scale & outcomes

Registered Apprenticeship is growing nationally, but participation remains small relative to the labor force, and pre-apprenticeship/youth models are understudied and underutilized. State dashboards (including Ohio's ApprenticeOhio) show active efforts but there is room to scale. [1]

### Employer barriers & incentives

Employer engagement is the most frequently cited barrier to expansion. States that use tax credits, subsidies, or direct reimbursements report higher employer take-up; rigorous studies indicate tax credits and wage subsidies can increase employer participation when well-designed. Liability/insurance and supervisor capacity are common employer concerns – especially for youth apprentices (ages 16–17). [1][3]

At the briefing, United Grinding shared that their latest round of apprenticeship recruitment drew 130 applicants for just 4 apprenticeship spots, underscoring the need for expanded capacity and funding to meet demand.

### Untapped Audiences

Apprenticeship participation does not yet reflect overall workforce demographics: women and some racial groups are underrepresented, and completion rates vary by race and gender. Intentional recruitment and supportive services will help grow the number of apprentices and close the gap between those retiring from the trades and those entering the trades. Reggie Brock, a fourth-year electrical apprentice, emphasized the importance of early exposure and wraparound supports like financial literacy training, which helped him succeed after participating in the Easterseals YouthBuild program. Reggie noted that he will be making $85,000 with no student debt, which is more than his girlfriend, who has a master's degree and significant student debt. [1]

> *"Give me those who wanted an apprenticeship but were not able to complete the 4-year program, and Cincinnati State can offer a pathway to employment."*
>
> --George Armstrong, Program Chair of Civil Engineering Technology, Construction, and Architecture at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College

## Challenges

### 1. Incentivizing employer participation

**Problem**

Employers – especially small and mid-sized firms – often cite the upfront costs and administrative burden of sponsoring apprenticeships as deterrents. State apprenticeship administrators repeatedly identify employer engagement as a top barrier to program expansion. [1]

**Recommendation**

States that offer targeted financial incentives (tax credits, hiring bonuses, up-front support to defray the cost of training) see greater sponsor formation and program starts; briefs summarizing state practices document incentive ranges from modest per-hire stipends to multi-thousand-dollar tax credits or cash assistance with related technical instruction. Academic work suggests tax credits can be effective at increasing apprenticeship uptake when well targeted. [2][9] The Workforce Council can collaborate with local employers and workforce partners to connect with policy makers and explore incentive opportunities.

### 2. Barriers created by Ohio's driver education law (under-21 requirement)

**Problem**

Ohio's under-21 driver training requirement (effective September 30, 2025) mandates Ohio-approved training (24 classroom hours, 8 behind-the-wheel training hours, and 50 hours of supervised practice) for license eligibility for those under 21. Media coverage and Ohio Traffic Safety Office materials indicate the new rules increase both time and cost burdens for 16–20-year-olds – creating a transportation barrier for school-to-work and apprenticeship participation, particularly among low-income youth. [7]

**Recommendation**

Stakeholders at the briefing flagged Ohio's new driver's license law as a major barrier to youth workforce participation, especially for youth apprentices who will now face increased costs and scheduling burdens. Local reporting estimated driver's education costs could be several hundred dollars (reports cite figures up to $1,000 depending on private vs. public providers), and the added hours make scheduling more difficult.[8] When licensing becomes cost-prohibitive, youth lack reliable transportation to worksites, internships, or classes – reducing access to apprenticeship opportunities, especially in rural areas or places with limited public transit.[10] The Workforce Council can collaborate with local employers and workforce partners to connect with policy makers and explore incentive opportunities.

### 3. Employer hesitation to host 16–17-year-olds

**Problem**

Employers frequently express concerns about liability, workers' compensation, the capacity to supervise younger workers, and compliance with youth labor laws. These concerns are a primary reason employers avoid youth apprenticeships despite employer-side interest in building pipelines. Surveys of youth apprenticeship grantees find liability and insurance worries to be a major recruitment obstacle. Panelists at the Sept. 26 briefing noted that companies that provide work-based learning opportunities for 16 and 17-year-olds are able to retain them and therefore get the "cream of the crop" of the youth workforce. [6]

**Recommendation**

The U.S. Department of Labor's youth apprenticeship studies and state program evaluations report employer concerns about insurance and supervision; however, guidance and case examples show many of these issues can be resolved – e.g., insurer negotiations, limited work scopes for minors, and state programs offering liability guidance or insurance support. Employers who are hesitant to engage with youth need awareness and assistance with getting their concerns addressed.[2] The Workforce Council can convene area employers to collectively troubleshoot challenges they're experiencing with providing on-site work experiences for 16 and 17 year olds.

## Opportunities

### 1. Recruiting from traditionally underrepresented populations

**Problem**

It is widely acknowledged that a "silver tsunami" is coming to Ohio in the skilled trades. Data shows that more individuals are retiring from the trades than there are individuals entering the trades. Existing methods of recruitment, and audiences targeted for recruitment have not been successful in bridging this gap.

**Recommendation**

Analyses of Registered Apprenticeship data reveal persistent under-representation of women and uneven completion rates by race. Apprenticeship programs that intentionally recruit, provide wraparound supports, and partner with community organizations improve retention outcomes. The U.S. Department of Labor and several intermediary studies recommend targeted outreach, supportive services, and clear career pathways to increase participation on apprenticeship programs. [1] Investing locally in existing successful programs that engage people of color and women, such as the Urban League of Greater Southwest Ohio's Building Futures Program, can help address this issue.

## 2. Changing perceptions about career pathways

**Problem**

There is a persistent misperception among the public, including many parents and K-12 educators, that a career in the skilled trades is less desirable and rewarding than a career that can be obtained through a four-year college degree.

**Recommendation**

Briefing panelists emphasized the need to engage not just students, but also parents, shifting perceptions about the trades and highlighting the long-term benefits of apprenticeship pathways. Research and state practice notes that cultural expectations – the "four-year degree as default" mentality – reduce student/family consideration of apprenticeships, even when they offer higher starting pay and no student debt risk. Messaging campaigns that present apprenticeship as a first-choice pathway and that engage teachers, counselors, and parents have helped increase enrollment in other states. [1] The Workforce Council can connect with employers to explore the feasibility of creating a community of practice around employer-created apprenticeship programs to promote knowledge sharing and effective practices.

## 3. Strengthening ties between employers and training providers

**Problem**

The lack of an existing framework or process that enables employers, educators, and workforce development professionals to come together regularly and collaboratively to identify and address opportunities and challenges has hindered efforts to grow apprenticeship programs and create trainings that align closely with employer needs.

**Recommendation**

Employer-driven curriculum and regular advisory partnerships improve program relevance and placement. State-level apprenticeship expansion efforts emphasize the importance of formal industry advisory councils, regional partnerships, and employer co-design. Federal guidance and state case studies document stronger placement and retention where ties are formalized. [1]

## 4. Increasing awareness of resources available to employers

**Problem**

Employers report a lack of awareness about the benefits of apprenticeship programs. In addition, once awareness and buy-in are obtained, employers need assistance with getting apprenticeship programs developed and launched. This includes a need for easy-to-find information about the return on investment that apprenticeship programs provide, and the logistics of establishing one. In addition, employers–especially small to mid-sized organizations–would benefit from assistance throughout the process. This is exacerbated by the outdated perception that apprenticeships are only for the skilled trades.

**Recommendation**

Promotion of apprenticeship programs should be a local and state priority, supported by ongoing information, materials, and guidance. Furthermore, establishing local industry advisories to create a sustainable talent pipeline through the apprenticeship model is necessary. [11]

### Panelists for Sept. 26, 2025, Briefing

- George Armstrong, Program Chair of Civil Engineering Technology, Construction and Architecture, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College
- Reginald Brock, Jr., 4th year electrical apprentice
- Andreas Brockmann, Apprenticeship Coordinator at United Grinding
- Chris Fridel, Assistant Director at the Cincinnati IBEW / NECA Electrical Training Center

### Selected Resources

**Apprenticeships**
Apprenti Cincinnati – https://cincinnatichamber.com/leadership-center/apprenti
Cincinnati State Certified Apprenticeship Program – https://www.cincinnatistate.edu/certified-apprenticeship-programs
Greater Cincinnati Apprenticeship Council – https://www.earnandlearn.com

**Pre-Apprenticeships**
Building Futures – https://www.ulgso.org/buildingfutures
Construction Career Training – https://www.eastersealsredwood.org/employment-services/in-demand-career-training/construction-career-training
Career Pathways Construction Training – https://www.cincy-caa.org/what-we-do/career-pathways/construction-pre-apprenticeshiptraining.html

**Employer Resources**
Apprenticeship Building America – https://www.apprenticeshiphubs.com
Apprentice Ohio – https://jfs.ohio.gov/job-services-and-unemployment/job-services/job-programs-and-services/apprentice-ohio/apprentice-ohio
National Apprenticeship Resource Hub – https://apprenticeships.urban.org
Registered Apprenticeship Program – https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/registered-apprenticeship-program

## Selected sources (key citations)


1. Apprenticeship.gov – national program statistics and outcomes (average starting salary and retention data). https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-apprenticeship
2. U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) – Registered Apprenticeship evidence and youth apprenticeship white paper. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP_2023_04_Youth_Apprenticeship_in_the_U.S.-White_Paper.pdf
3. U.S. Department of Labor –Understanding the Capacity of State Apprenticeship Systems https://www.dol.gov/resource-library/understanding-capacity-state-apprenticeship-systems-apprenticeship-evidence
4. Urban Institute & Abt Associates: analyses showing earnings gains for apprentices and the need to scale awareness. https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/registered-apprenticeships-can-increase-earnings-not-enough-people-know
5. Ohio's ApprenticeOhio dashboard and ApprenticeOhio materials (state data and pre-apprenticeship counts). https://ohiolmi.com/Home/Dashboards/ApprenticeOhio_Dashboard
6. DOL and state briefs on employer incentives and models (Spaulding; JFF policy briefs; Urban strategic investments). https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/State-incentives-to-promote-and-support-apprenticeship-final-v2-508.pdf
7. GAO report (2025) summarizing benefits of apprenticeship models. Government Accountability Office https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-107040
8. Ohio Traffic Safety Office & local reporting on the under-21 driver training requirements (Sept 30, 2025 effective date and cost concerns). https://otso.ohio.gov/programs/ohio-driver-training/for-drivers/under-21-driver-training/under-21-driver-training
9. DOL and state reports documenting employer concerns about liability and youth apprentices. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP_2023_02_Models_of_Youth_Registered_Apprenticeship_Expansion.pdf
10. WCPO – Beginning Sept. 30, driver's education becomes mandatory for Ohioans under 21 seeking a driver's license https://www.wcpo.com/news/state/state-ohio/after-sept-30-drivers-education-becomes-mandatory-for-ohioans-under-21-seeking-a-drivers-license
11. Mitschelen, Darcey Lynn (2023). ATTITUDES AND VALUES THAT INFLUENCE EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS. Purdue University Graduate School. Thesis. https://doi.org/10.25394/PGS.21904668.v2


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