



# A Promising Model of Youth Apprenticeship in Chicago

## AT A GLANCE

Youth apprenticeship represents a proven approach to addressing the skills gap. Career Launch Chicago has developed a promising model for youth apprenticeships and engagement with partners to support the effort.

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## About the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA)

New America's Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA) is a multi-year, collaborative initiative that will support the success of efforts in states and cities to expand access to high-quality apprenticeship opportunities for high school age youth. Expanding youth apprenticeship is a strategy for building a more inclusive economy by connecting the learning needs of students with the talent needs of industry.

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# Introduction

Acquiring in-demand skills can lead to positive outcomes for workers and learners, preparing them to move into [quality jobs](#) and pursue further opportunities for economic advancement throughout their lives. For young people, youth apprenticeship is an especially beneficial skill-building experience because it provides career pathways in which participants can earn money while learning and gaining experience in real-world workplaces. According to Apprenticeship USA, there were [228,535](#) people between the ages of 16 and 24 in the U.S. Registered Apprenticeship system in 2022, and individuals who complete apprenticeships generally experience “[higher earnings growth](#) [than] comparable workers.” Despite those benefits, apprenticeship is an underutilized workforce development solution, and youth apprenticeship programs in particular have experienced limited growth and adoption.

Many youth apprenticeship programs experience [hurdles](#) related to acquiring reliable data about the pool of potential apprentices, gaining the buy-in of employers and other stakeholders, ensuring that apprenticeship experiences would qualify as transferrable postsecondary credit, and securing reliable transportation for apprentices. Youth apprenticeship programs in rural areas must navigate [added barriers](#), including inadequate public transportation, employers with limited resources, and insufficient broadband internet infrastructure. In addition, people in rural areas may be more likely to have limited socioeconomic resources and may face greater health challenges than people in other areas.

However, key workforce and education stakeholders—including the [U.S. Department of Labor](#), state and local governments, philanthropic initiatives such as the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship ([PAYA](#)), and secondary and postsecondary educational institutions—have recognized the promise of youth apprenticeship as an effective talent solution and are investing significant amounts of time, money, and other resources into these programs.

It’s important to note that there’s currently no standard definition of “youth apprenticeship” at the national level, but the term typically refers to an earn-and-learn program that combines paid on-the-job training with aligned in-person or virtual classroom instruction (often called related technical instruction).

The term is sometimes used to refer to pre-apprenticeship programs that prepare participants for full Registered Apprenticeship programs, or to Registered Apprenticeship programs designed to serve young adults. And some states, including Illinois and Wisconsin, have established youth apprenticeship systems that exist in parallel to the Registered Apprenticeship system but have reduced requirements for on-the-job training and related instruction to accommodate high school students’ schedules. In 2018, Jobs for the Future (JFF) and PAYA aimed to provide greater clarity to

this growing field by developing a [set of standards](#) that could be used to define a high-quality youth apprenticeship. Many U.S. providers of youth apprenticeship programs have adopted these principles.

PAYA supports local and regional youth apprenticeship initiatives across the country. In Chicago, a [PAYA grantee](#) called Career Launch Chicago has developed a promising model that apprenticeship providers and intermediaries could replicate to build and scale successful youth apprenticeship programs in their own communities.

A collaborative initiative led by Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago, [Career Launch Chicago](#) is working to develop equitable and inclusive youth apprenticeship programs and expand access to quality work-based learning experiences for Chicago residents. As it grows, Career Launch Chicago aspires to build and scale youth apprenticeship programs that offer young people throughout the city opportunities to build in-demand skills and prepare for quality jobs in multiple high-growth industries, including advanced manufacturing, health care, and information technology. It also hopes to expand early college courses that are relevant to those pathways in target high schools and develop a work-based learning continuum that extends into earlier grades.

This profile offers an in-depth look at the model Career Launch Chicago is developing, with examples of structures and approaches that other intermediaries and apprenticeship providers could apply to their own programs. It also offers recommendations of ways to scale youth apprenticeship by better integrating education and workforce systems.

# Insight Story: Career Launch Chicago

## About Career Launch Chicago

Career Launch Chicago (CLC) launched in the fall of 2020 with one staff member. The team has since grown to four: a director, two pathway managers, and a coordinator who ensures that the young apprentices have the wraparound supports they need. CLC's program leadership is in the City Colleges of Chicago's district office, which serves their seven community colleges in the greater Chicago area.

In the summer of 2021, CLC ran its first youth apprenticeship program in partnership with a paid internship program led by Chicago Public Schools. That initial effort gave CLC an opportunity to begin recruiting employers in targeted occupational sectors and engage them in conversations about

the benefits of youth apprenticeship. A total of three employers had participated in the summer 2021 program, and then during the fall of 2021, CLC recruited four more employers to take part in a pilot earn-and-learn program for high-school-age learners and workers that took place in the spring and summer of 2022. Twenty-one young people participated in the pilot program. They were recruited from career and technical education programs whose coursework prepared them to immediately enter paid work-based learning programs with employers.

In the 2022-23 academic year, five additional employers and 32 apprentices took part in CLC's youth apprenticeship program. An inaugural [12-month program](#), which was the first to include a full cohort of 32 students, launched in the summer of 2023 and will conclude in the summer of 2024. CLC's goal for the 2024-25 program is to nearly double enrollment to 62 youth apprentices.

## Programmatic Design

Career Launch Chicago has primarily focused on developing youth apprenticeships in the following industries and occupations: advanced manufacturing, health care (with pharmacy technician and certified nursing assistant courses), IT (a help desk technician course), auto body repair (a collision technician course), facilities management, and construction.

One of CLC's goals is to prepare students for success in college or careers after they complete their apprenticeships. Toward that end, the program provides all apprentices with "journey maps" that help them understand how their apprenticeships can lead to further training opportunities at the City Colleges of Chicago. The journey maps support students in developing their postsecondary plans, which are required as part of a Chicago Public Schools program called [Learn.Plan.Succeed](#). CLC measures its success by tracking the number of individuals who complete apprenticeships and then are hired full time or matriculate to related two- or four-year college programs. Thus far, the first cohort has concluded and 20 apprentices completed their apprenticeships, with one landing a full-time job and 19 enrolling in college.

CLC programs are designed to begin the summer before apprentices start their senior year in high school, with the exception of the construction pathway programs, which require apprentices to be at least 18 years of age and begin the summer following high school graduation. Students must be enrolled in a City Colleges of Chicago program to participate in the construction apprenticeship.

In the summer prior to beginning their apprenticeships, students participate in a paid 120-hour, six-week program called Aim to Launch (A2L), which features coursework that provides foundational knowledge that's core to the occupations they're entering and offers opportunities to earn college credits and/or complete an industry-recognized credential. For example, the A2L for Advanced Manufacturing course includes welding credits and OSHA 10 certification through Richard J. Daley

College. A2L is designed to level the playing field for apprentices from populations that may have faced systemic barriers limiting their access to employment opportunities in certain fields.

Through its partnership with Chicago Public Schools, CLC is able to offer the A2L courses with the help of [One Summer Chicago](#), a program paid for by the city that offers young people opportunities to work during the summer. Employers have been supportive of this model because it prepares the youth apprentices to be ready to work on day one. Successfully completing A2L coursework gives students an incentive to continue working toward a certificate or degree following completion of their apprenticeships.

Currently, CLC offers its youth apprenticeship programs through partnerships between City Colleges of Chicago and 11 high schools within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system that elected to offer an honors course that provides credit for apprenticeship experiences. The apprenticeship program includes a combination of skill-building activities such as related classroom or technical instruction and a virtual professional development course led by the apprenticeship's teacher of record and CLC's youth apprenticeship coordinator. Additionally, youth apprentices leave school after sixth period for on-the-job training at their employers' facilities.

For schools that want to partner with CLC to offer youth apprenticeships, the first step is for the school administration to elect to offer the course. Then the CLC program works with staff at the school, primarily guidance counselors, to recruit students through information sessions, classroom visits, or individualized outreach conversations. CLC also offers parents opportunities to visit apprenticeship sites.

Career Launch Chicago also conducts quarterly in-person employer site visits, which include the CLC youth apprenticeship coordinator, the apprentice's supervisor, and the apprentice to assess the student's progress toward or achievement of occupational competencies. This process can pay off for students and employers. In one case, an advanced manufacturing apprentice was hired full time after completing the program and then received the employer's support to complete additional certification programs through a community college.

Although the initial pilot program recruited students from career and technical programs with curricula related to specific professions, CLC's goal is to recruit students broadly from across the CPS system. The Aim to Launch program discussed above plays an important role in helping CLC to achieve that goal by enabling students to gain foundational knowledge about particular occupational or career pathways even if they haven't previously studied related subject matter.

The early success of the program was evident this year when CLC held a large "signing day" event for apprentices that was attended by 180 people, including extended family members of many of the participants.

## Employer Engagement

CLC staff have focused on establishing new partnerships with employers who are invested in youth skills development and who believe in the return on investment apprenticeship provides. The program's most successful employer engagement efforts have been targeted, individualized outreach and marketing campaigns.

However, employer engagement has not been without challenges, and CLC sees a need to increase employer education efforts to improve buy-in and take advantage of existing employer relationships that other public school and community college initiatives have established. "There is still a lot of work to be done to spread the word about youth apprenticeship and really show what youth apprenticeship can do in the city of Chicago," said CLC Director Stephanie Gomez.

Northwestern Medicine, a nonprofit health care system affiliated with the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, is a standout employer partner that, according to Gomez, understands CLC's vision and recognizes the value of youth apprenticeship. The organization is interested in promoting ongoing improvements in the program and is working with CLC to explore how experience in a youth apprenticeship could be counted toward the competencies students are required to achieve in health-related practicums. At the same time, CLC's postsecondary partner, Malcolm X College, City Colleges of Chicago's Center of Excellence for Healthcare, is exploring opportunities for former apprentices who are working toward certificates or degrees to receive credit for prior learning for the competencies mastered in CLC youth apprenticeships.

Other work-based learning programs for young people should consider adopting CLC's model of leveraging the skills and experiences students gain in youth apprenticeships to meet other work-based learning and educational requirements. It's an exciting and innovative approach that gives students an incentive to pursue postsecondary education and training by accelerating their progress toward their goals.

## Plans for Greater Impact

Two of CLC's key goals for the coming year are to continue to strategically build and scale its programs and register its apprenticeships with the Department of Labor, starting with the Pharmacy Technician program. Specifically, CLC plans to double the number of participants with the next cohort and offer three additional Aim to Launch summer programs with credit-bearing coursework in the summer of 2024. And as part of its ongoing effort to strengthen its employer partnerships, CLC plans to build a learning community to share effective practices. Stressing the importance of the plans for growth and improvement, Gomez said, "We are all Chicago kids. This is big for us and our city."



Recognizing that similar initiatives could have equally big impacts on communities across the country, CLC offered some helpful recommendations for organizations interested in launching youth apprenticeship programs:

- **Employer Engagement:** CLC encourages employers to think of themselves as partners in an apprenticeship—as co-developers of talent rather than consumers of the talent that the apprenticeship will produce. Once employers have embraced that mindset, it's important to help them assess their capacity to offer youth apprenticeships, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that participants have access to various support services in order to participate fully. For its partners, CLC provides those wraparound supports.
- **Employer Recruitment:** Meeting with employers one by one is time-consuming, so it's a good idea to streamline recruitment efforts by organizing activities for larger groups, such as roundtable discussions. Also, avoid entering into agreements with specific individuals at employers because staffing changes could derail those types of arrangements. Instead, relationships should be between the institutions, formalized through memoranda of understanding or other agreements.
- **Partners' Roles and Responsibilities:** All partners must agree about which aspects of the work each stakeholder is responsible for. Don't leave space for assumptions or gray areas because accountability is essential to successful collaboration.

## Promising Practices

Youth apprenticeship is gaining traction not just in Chicago but across the country. The CLC model is a promising and innovative approach that could be replicated in other cities.

Based on what we've learned through our work with the CLC initiative and from other [promising apprenticeship models](#), we recommend that program providers adopt these practices:

- **Pilot, develop a proof of concept, launch, and then scale:** Instead of waiting until it had the capacity to launch a full-scale yearlong youth apprenticeship, CLC started to build the foundation and scaffolding for its program right away. Initially, it worked with an existing Chicago Public Schools summer internship program to begin forging relationships with employers that would be willing to partner in a forthcoming CLC pilot. CLC staff then spent several months recruiting a group of students in career pathways programs to participate in their youth apprenticeship pilot. The pilot showed that youth apprenticeships should be a full year, and it provided a backbone for a full-year program. CLC then engaged with a broader pool of students to recruit its first full cohort of youth apprentices for a program set to launch the following academic year. CLC has now established a structure based on an annual schedule that will support continued growth in the number of program offerings, employer partnerships, and participants. This pilot–

proof of concept–full launch approach is an excellent way to build the infrastructure for a youth apprenticeship that will continue to grow and achieve long-term success.

- **Approach partnerships with an open, collaborative mindset:** Many colleges and other education and workforce organizations have a tendency to be silent about their employer relationships and other strategic partnerships, and may be unwilling to share their contacts with intermediaries and other internship stakeholders. This siloed rather than collaborative approach limits the capacity to scale programs and initiatives by preventing the opportunities for enhanced impact that occurs when partners are free to work together and share insights and expertise. If all parties saw the value of openly inviting the employers they work with and other partners to the table, it would create a trilateral value proposition where employers would benefit from integrated systems, streamlined processes, and more efficient communication; institutions would strengthen their partnerships and enhance their value to one another; and learners and workers would be part of a more seamless work and learning ecosystem that offers increased access to quality jobs.
- **Provide additional opportunities for dual credit, articulated credit, and credit for prior learning:** Strengthening partnerships between secondary and postsecondary systems to create opportunities for youth apprentices to earn credentials (that could be recognized as credit for prior learning) and college credit (through dual enrollment or articulated credit) has been found to have positive effects on college enrollment and degree attainment. CLC’s Aim to Launch program offers an example of the positive impact that approach can have. By providing youth apprentices with pathways to gain foundational knowledge and skills while earning college credit and industry-recognized credentials, it creates incentives for them to continue pursuing postsecondary education after they complete their apprenticeships. In addition, CLC is working to ensure that youth apprenticeship experiences can count toward postsecondary work-based learning requirements, such as practicums for health-related programs.

## Conclusion

Youth apprenticeship is a powerful skills-development model that can put young people on pathways to quality jobs in high-growth industries. And well-designed high-quality youth apprenticeship programs streamline those pathways because they can blur the lines between education and workforce systems by integrating high school programming, paid work-based learning with mentor support, and coursework that leads to postsecondary credit and industry-recognized credentials.

In just four years, Career Launch Chicago has developed an especially promising model for offering youth apprenticeships in a large urban area and engaging with employers and other partners from across systems and sectors to support the effort. Organizations that currently run or are thinking of

launching youth apprenticeships could learn a lot about what makes a program successful by studying CLC's approach.