



Empowering Youth Through Innovative Apprenticeships in Indiana

AT A GLANCE

In the Indiana Uplands, Regional Opportunity Initiatives (ROI) is successfully implementing a student-centered approach to youth apprenticeship in adherence with child labor law policies through a program called UpSkill.

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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 supports states and cities in their efforts 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.

Contents

***Introduction*..... 4**

***Program Profile: ROI’s UpSkill Youth Apprenticeship*..... 5**

Employer and Stakeholder Engagement..... 7

Labor Law and Liability..... 9

***Promising Practices* 11**

***Conclusion* 12**

Introduction

Apprenticeship is a proven workforce training model that has offered pathways to quality jobs for generations. But in the United States, apprenticeship is an underutilized workforce development solution, and apprenticeship programs for young people in particular have experienced limited growth and adoption to date.

However, recent developments indicate that interest in apprenticeship is beginning to grow. A Jobs for the Future (JFF) [report](#) analyzing the Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Data System (RAPIDS) found that the number of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 enrolling in registered apprenticeship programs each year grew 113% from 2010 to 2020.

Moreover, key workforce and education stakeholders—including the [U.S. Department of Labor](#) (DOL), state and local governments, philanthropic initiatives such as New America’s Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship ([PAYA](#)), employers, and secondary and postsecondary educational institutions—are increasingly investing in apprenticeship as an effective talent strategy that can serve youth as part of addressing U.S. workforce needs.

For example, the DOL’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) has allocated more than [\\$7 million](#) to the Youth Apprenticeship Intermediaries initiative, which has established more than 175 youth-focused apprenticeship programs over the past five years and created opportunities for more than 5,700 young people who have entered an apprenticeship program during that time.

Offering a combination of paid on-the-job training, mentorship, and formal classroom or online instruction and culminating in credits or credentials for workers and learners between the ages of 16 and 24, [youth apprenticeship](#) is gaining traction as a proactive approach to bridging the gap between education and employment for young people.

However, increasing youth participation in apprenticeship is not without challenges. For example, JFF’s analysis of the 2010-20 RAPIDS data found while youth participation in registered apprenticeship programs had more than doubled during that period, racial-, ethnic-, and gender-based [inequities](#) in apprenticeship outcomes and access to apprenticeship had remained nearly unchanged. And concerns about the [safety](#) of young workers and the need to remain in compliance with [child labor laws](#) can deter employers and training providers from offering youth apprenticeships.

Clearly, a commitment to maintaining safe working conditions and engaging ethical business practices is essential for any program in which employees including minors will be on the job in real-world workplaces. And federal, state, local, and regional stakeholders across the education and

workforce ecosystems are making strides in building programs that offer young people high-quality, work-based learning experiences while ensuring that participants will be safe and treated fairly.

In [Indiana](#), for instance, a coalition of employers, educators, state officials, and other stakeholders has launched an [ambitious statewide youth apprenticeship program](#) modeled on the renowned Swiss apprenticeship system. The initiative is advancing innovative youth apprenticeships that take a student-centered approach and emphasize adherence to labor laws and other standards of quality. One of the vested stakeholders is [Regional Opportunity Initiatives](#) (ROI), a nonprofit that has developed a work-based learning program for high school students called [UpSkill](#).

This profile offers an in-depth look into the UpSkill program, with examples of structures and approaches ROI has adopted to effectively engage employers and other stakeholders and successfully implement a high-quality work-based learning program that's in compliance with liability and labor laws and offers participants safe and inclusive working environments.

Program Profile: ROI's UpSkill Youth Apprenticeship

About Regional Opportunity Initiatives

ROI is a nonprofit regional intermediary whose mission is to advance economic and community prosperity in the 11 counties of the Uplands region of rural southwest central Indiana. Its education and workforce team focuses on bringing education and business leaders together to invest in, design, and implement programs that build a workforce prepared to meet the talent needs of regional employers.

In 2016, ROI conducted its first [occupational needs assessment](#) to understand the region's education and workforce needs. The assessment revealed that in order to meet the labor demands of local employers and avoid losing local talent to career opportunities elsewhere, the Uplands needed education, training, and workforce development programs that prepare young people for careers in STEM fields and put them on pathways to jobs in the region's three key economic sectors: [advanced manufacturing](#), [life sciences](#), and [national security and defense](#). Recent assessments also revealed that young people were interested in the career pathways available in the region and that youth apprenticeship would be an effective model for preparing them for those opportunities. Equipped with this data, ROI focused on creating strong regional connections between educators, employers, and other stakeholders so that they could collaborate on designing and implementing such programs. The organization stepped in to serve as an intermediary to engage stakeholders and

enable them to become “co-producers of talent,” said Michi McClaine, ROI’s vice president of talent development.

Programmatic Design

With initial seed funding from [Ascend Indiana and PAYA](#), Regional Opportunity Initiatives launched [UpSkill](#) in the fall of 2021. UpSkill is staffed by a team of people who work collaboratively within ROI’s supportive environment to directly serve apprentices and their families, employers and key industry partners, and regional educational institutions. UpSkill’s sector specialist has direct industry experience and serves as the main point of contact for employers and industry collaborators. The program’s career connections specialist and student success manager provide student-centered support for schools and the youth apprentices and their families. The vice president of talent development and the CEO provide overall strategic oversight and direction.

As an intermediary, ROI partners with K-12 school districts, postsecondary institutions, and industry stakeholders to administer the UpSkill apprenticeships, which start in the participant’s junior year of high school, continue in senior year, and include a follow-up period in the year following graduation from high school. The third year is designed to ensure that the youth apprentices that have successfully transitioned to adulthood are advancing to quality jobs offering opportunities for economic advancement.

ROI’s UpSkill program has been inspired by models of several other apprenticeship initiatives, including [PAYA](#), [MAP](#), and [CareerWise Colorado](#) while also incorporating its own unique elements. In alignment with the standards of high-quality work-based learning programs, UpSkill offers participating apprentices opportunities to earn money while getting on-the-job training in real-world workplaces and taking part in related classroom instruction. ROI evaluates apprentices’ achievements using a hybrid model that includes both competency- and time-based assessments. The organization supports students every step of the way, offering them help with job applications, interviewing, and placement processes and providing ongoing guidance during the training itself.

UpSkill launched its first apprenticeship program in the summer of 2022, with a cohort of 27 young people who found jobs with six employers, including a city government, a fiber communications company, a defense contractor, an advanced manufacturing firm, and a company in the limestone industry. Interest in UpSkill has increased since then, and the program has grown, impacting numerous sectors of Indiana’s economy.

Through UpSkill, ROI offers both registered apprenticeship (RA) programs and non-registered programs. Its first RA offering is an IT program that leads to an IT technician or technical support occupation, which it offers in partnership with regional telecommunications companies Smithville Fiber and Mainstream Fiber and secondary and postsecondary educational institutions. This first RA provided ROI with an opportunity to reshape apprenticeship and pilot a new approach in a non-traditional field.

ROI also offers three non-registered youth apprenticeships in engineering technology, finance (focused on business and IT functions), and manufacturing (including machining). To date, advanced manufacturing is UpSkill's largest apprenticeship track, with 34 students in 12 occupations. STEM is second with 25 students, and IT is third with 15 students. Overall, ROI has matched 91 UpSkill apprentices with 34 employers over three cohorts.

ROI formally evaluates student progress twice per year (once each semester) using a four-step scale to rate their degree of competency in both job-related technical skills and broader employability skills. This evaluation process is intended to be similar to the performance reviews apprentices will experience in full-time jobs.

Employer and Stakeholder Engagement

Employer Partnerships

As an intermediary, ROI acts as the liaison between employers and other stakeholders, including schools, students, and parents. The organization has leveraged existing relationships with employers from its other workforce development initiatives, and it has also forged new partnerships. In addition, ROI has partnerships with regional workforce development boards, economic development boards, and other entities. Among other approaches, ROI works to generate interest in UpSkill among potential partners through presentations at meetings and events and via word of mouth. The greatest champions of UpSkill's youth apprenticeship program have been the employers that ROI works with most closely.

ROI begins working with employers in the fall to understand their needs, find out what roles they'll have available, and identify the technical training it will take to prepare young people for those roles. It focuses on finding "high-quality, high-opportunity jobs that will give students a good standard of living once they complete their apprenticeship," said Kim Waldridge, ROI's sector specialist.

During the spring semester, ROI launches apprentice-employer engagement campaigns initially via student-centered outreach efforts. Marketing strategies include promoting apprenticeship opportunities to school guidance counselors, work-based learning coordinators, and career technical education directors. ROI also reaches out to students through classroom discussions and presentations at high schools and career centers. In some smaller rural schools, presentations may be to the entire sophomore class. Students express initial interest by completing a brief form that they access on their phones via a QR code. An ROI representative then meets with interested students' parents or guardians to offer them an overview of the UpSkill program and ask if they'll give the students permission to participate. Once they get permission to participate, students are interviewed by prospective employers and attend open houses at employers' facilities. The open

houses are scheduled to take place early in the evening to ensure that as many students and family members as possible will be able to attend. This approach has proved to be an effective way for students and their families to get to know the employer and learn what they'll be doing in their roles. It also ensures that students and family members are aware of how far the job site is from school or home. (ROI also works with families and schools to reduce barriers, such as transportation.) Students who accept the youth apprenticeship offer attend a full-day orientation and receive an invitation to attend a "Signing Day" event in June with their families and their future employers.

Postsecondary Partnerships

ROI works with employers, schools, and students and their families to create individualized training plans that cover job-related competencies, general employability skills, and worksite safety protocols. The plans also address how school curricula will prepare students for their apprenticeships. Students, parents, ROI, schools, and employers all sign off on the plan at the beginning of year one.

Students can earn college credit if they participate in dual enrollment programs or complete industry-recognized professional certifications that are applicable to postsecondary programs of study, such as the CompTIA A+ certification.

ROI works proactively with high schools and postsecondary partners to identify opportunities to offer certification programs for youth apprentices. And such programs stand a good chance of success within Indiana's unique education and training ecosystem, where statewide community college Ivy Tech offers an extensive array of short-term certification programs and partnerships with four-year universities. Looking ahead, ROI has plans to expand its postsecondary partnerships to more universities, including Vincennes University in the southern part of the region, to reach even more students.

These partnerships can help fill gaps for ROI programs in rural locales or other areas with limited resources by offering online certification courses for apprentices whose schools don't have the extensive curricula or teachers with specialized expertise that larger schools in the region might have. For example, one student received a technical training certificate in plastics injection molding and manufacturing directly through her apprenticeship employer, enabling her to leave high school with training and a background that Waldrige described as "head and shoulders above" what other job applicants are likely to have.

Students who complete ROI-sponsored youth apprenticeships earn multiple postsecondary credits, possibly even enough for an associate's degree.

Labor Law and Liability

Safety in Youth Apprenticeship

The safety of participants is a major consideration for providers of youth apprenticeship programs, especially in occupations that are classified as [hazardous](#) by the U.S. Department of Labor.

ROI takes steps to protect the well-being and rights of the youth in UpSkill apprenticeships. To ensure that their companies are in compliance with required regulations, participating employers take part in training that covers liability insurance considerations for apprentices, and addresses state and federal rules about measures for keeping minors safe in hazardous occupations.

ROI also strives to pair students with skilled and trustworthy mentors and supervisors. In addition, ROI representatives check in with apprentices weekly to confirm that they're having good experiences and to give them an opportunity to report issues of concern—including any accidents or “near misses” that might have occurred on the job. Additionally, during the summer of their first year, youth apprentices participate in [OSHA 10](#) certification training, which covers workplace safety and can count toward requirements for a postsecondary certificate and degree.

To further ensure the safety and well-being of young people in UpSkill programs, ROI, schools, and employers offer participants additional wraparound supports, including transportation assistance and access to work clothes and safety equipment.

Conversations With Employers

ROI's UpSkill program takes a collaborative and solutions-focused approach to educating employers about expanding the adoption of youth apprenticeship and the factors they must consider when they hire young people. As an example, Waldrige points to the steps ROI took in developing a youth apprenticeship hiring strategy with a national security and defense contractor, describing it as one of the organization's greatest accomplishments. The employer had questions about whether they could hire young employees and get security clearances for them and after reviewing their own company's contract language, they found there were no age limitations and that youth apprentices could gain the security clearances they needed. In the first year of its youth apprenticeship, the company hired six 16-year-old youth apprentices for entry-level engineering and logistics roles. ROI plans to capitalize on the success of this program and reach out to other defense contractors to encourage them to participate.

In some sectors—including construction, heavy equipment and manufacturing, and life sciences manufacturing—employers are prohibited from hiring people under 18 for certain hazardous occupations. When implementing youth apprenticeships in those industries, ROI has collaborated with employers to create programs that include 18-to-24-month rotations through non-hazardous business functions, such as finance, engineering, and administration. According to ROI, when these

apprentices turned 18 and were able to move into jobs with hazardous activities, they were better able to handle their new responsibilities than many people hired from the field because they had a more rounded understanding of the companies' many business functions.

Common Safety Concerns

Employers can have questions and concerns regarding hiring young people and related job [safety standards](#) that must be considered. ROI's UpSkill team found that equipping employers with accurate information helped dispel misconceptions and/or alleviate apprehension regarding the following common concerns:

1. **We can't hire apprentices under the age of 18.** The fact is that state and federal regulations generally allow minors to work in about half of the occupations the DOL classifies as hazardous if they are directly supervised, don't work full time, and are participating in a training program. Apprenticeship employers and the intermediaries who assist them should consult [applicable state and federal labor and liability laws](#) to ensure that they understand the specific criteria and are able to comply with all regulations.
2. **Executives may not support plans to hire youth apprentices even though personnel "on the ground" might be enthusiastic about the idea.** It's true that some companies don't have explicit policies about implementing youth apprenticeships and the executive-level leaders of such organizations may hesitate to approve plans for these programs even if frontline supervisors and managers would welcome youth apprentices. In such situations, apprenticeship advocates must be patient and take the time to educate colleagues about what an apprenticeship program would involve as their proposals make their way through the organization's governance process.
3. **Smaller companies sometimes don't have the capacity to handle an extra person.** Costs and staff capacity are important considerations for employers thinking about participating in a youth apprenticeship program. Hiring apprentices may not be feasible if managers and other employees don't have the time to supervise and train young workers. However, some small companies may welcome the extra help—that's the case for a small machine shop that's partnering with ROI in a manufacturing apprenticeship. It's important for intermediaries to understand the unique needs of each individual employer and recommend tailored solutions on a case-by-case basis.

Promising Practices

As youth apprenticeship continues to draw interest from employers across multiple industries and occupations, organizations will inevitably have questions or apprehensions about regulatory compliance and other challenges associated with hiring, mentoring, and training young people in the workplace. Based on its experiences with youth apprenticeship to date and insights gleaned from a survey of employers, ROI has these recommendations for intermediaries, schools, employers and other stakeholders:

Remember that relationship-building is a full-time job: All parties—and intermediaries in particular—must put ongoing effort into building relationships with one another. It’s important to identify one organization as the apprenticeship program’s central point of contact to act as a liaison facilitating communication between and among school administrators, teachers, students, parents, employers, the workforce development system, and community-based organizations. The goal is to foster sustainable relationships and create a collaborative atmosphere to build a win-win program that meets employers’ talent needs and ensures the safety, well-being, and success of the apprentices.

- **Provide ongoing mentorship for apprentices and employers:** Pairing students with skilled and trustworthy mentors and supervisors is foundational to the apprentices’ success and safety. This includes having frequent meetings with apprentices to assess placement fit and to address any concerns. It also encompasses providing training, support, and routine check-ins for employers regarding adherence to labor law and liability standards, apprentice on-the-job learning, and apprentice skills attainment to ensure that the students learn, advance, and have an overall positive experience.
- **Be agile and flexible:** Every individual and organization in the youth apprenticeship ecosystem has needs that might change, including students, employers, and schools. Seek customizable solutions to address shifting priorities while establishing clear lines of communication and accountability to achieve programmatic goals. Develop on-ramps and off-ramps for students that increase access to viable career pathways, support the apprentices’ career goals, and build high-quality programs that align those goals with employers’ talent needs.
- **Let the apprentices tell their success stories:** Demonstrating the real-world impact of apprenticeship programs is a great way to expand awareness of the value of work-based learning. One of the best ways to do that is to tell the stories of how apprenticeship experiences benefitted individual participants. In one example that ROI is especially proud of, an apprentice who was interested in becoming a line worker for a utility company—a highly sought-after role in the Indiana Uplands—used the apprenticeship experience to make

connections in the field and currently has a full-ride scholarship to pursue a bachelor's degree in engineering as a first-generation college student. The message ROI wants to convey is that its UpSkill program benefits students who may not be the highest academic performers but can be successful if they find the right career fit. The organization has seen apprentices gain self-confidence and make stronger connections to others, including employers. Moreover, ROI says the UpSkill program has enabled young people from populations facing systemic barriers to employment and education to get on pathways that lead to quality jobs and opportunities for economic advancement. To promote similar stories, ROI featured [profiles](#) of five UpSkill youth apprentices on its website during Youth Apprenticeship Week 2024.

- Explore ways to build new pathways to economic advancement for members of populations that are underrepresented in certain fields, such as programs designed to expand opportunities for women in STEM careers:** Members of the UpSkill team are tireless advocates for encouraging young women to pursue jobs in STEM fields, and they say they've seen an increase in the number of women in STEM in the region, even though young women and girls have few STEM role models and a more limited exposure to STEM career pathways. In one positive development, ROI notes that some employers have added positions that are adjacent to STEM-related roles as a way to expose young women to those kinds of positions and enable them to get to know women in professional positions who could be mentors and role models. Those types of actions have spurred many young women to explore STEM careers through youth apprenticeship.

Conclusion

Youth apprenticeship is poised to play an increasingly significant role in shaping the workforce of the future. Apprenticeship is a proven workforce development model that can enable young people to build both technical expertise that's in demand in specific industries and broad employability skills, including an understanding of the professional expectations they will encounter in real-world work environments.

However, as beneficial as apprenticeship experiences can be for workers and learners who are exploring career pathways, employers and other organizations that offer work-based learning programs for young people—especially those under the age of 18—must be mindful of the need to comply with child labor laws and regulations designed to ensure worker safety. To offer truly high-quality youth apprenticeship experiences, employers, schools, and other program leaders must take steps to ensure that participants are treated fairly, don't face exploitation or discrimination, and aren't put at risk in hazardous occupations.

This means that designing and implementing a quality youth apprenticeship program may present more challenges than offering a program for adults. But youth apprenticeships with leaders that make an effort to meet high standards and ensure the safety and well-being of participants will be in the best position to succeed. Providing positive and constructive learning environments not only benefits the apprentices themselves, but also strengthens the employers and the broader education and workforce ecosystems. Modern youth apprenticeship has the potential to be an innovative talent solution for employers, and it offers them an opportunity to be prime contributors to efforts to develop and retain the talent they need for the future growth of their companies.

Since launching UpSkill, ROI has developed a number of effective strategies for advancing apprenticeship, ensuring regulatory compliance, and promoting the well-being of high-school-age apprentices while also building effective training and education programs for employers. Its innovative and collaborative approach could offer valuable lessons and insights for organizations across the country that are navigating the landscape of youth apprenticeship.