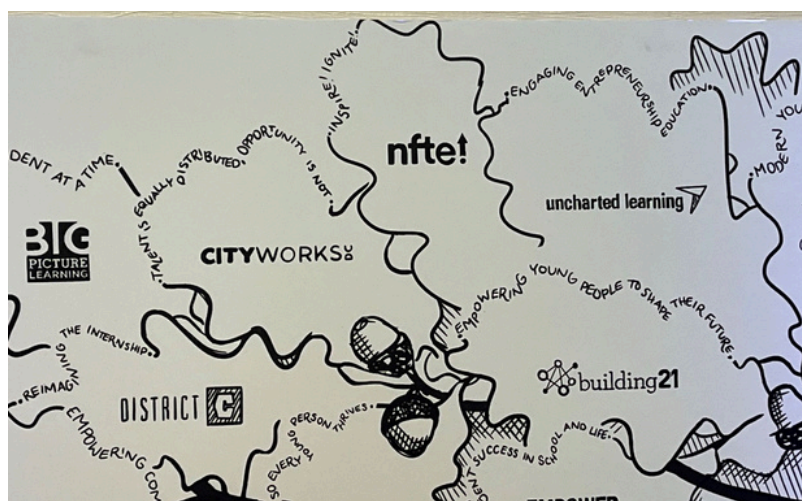




# Uniting for Impact: The Role of Convening Organizations in Systemic Change



In February, American Student Assistance® (ASA), a national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures, hosted the inaugural Work-Based Learning Leadership Forum with a nationwide network of work-based leaders, including the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), in Raleigh, North Carolina to discuss work-based learning policies, trends, and current environments.<sup>1</sup> Though many of the leaders know each other from various conferences, partnerships, and opportunities across the country, the ASA forum allowed these leaders not only to get to know each other better, but also engage in real discussion about the issues their organizations are dealing with. With 30 to 40 incredible organizations in attendance, they tackled critical issues around policy barriers, including school system engagement, and fostering meaningful connections to strengthen career pathways for young people.

By bringing together so many organizations invested in the same work, ASA was able to hear the real challenges affecting them and provide a framework to develop solutions. NFTE believes in the power of convenings such as these and supports the work ASA is doing as a connector of employers and educators. This policy brief discusses the challenges work-based learning organizations are facing and provides a broad set of recommendations that can be used for work-based learning organizations and broader advocacy and policy work.

## Engagement is Key: Large Conferences Compared to Small Convenings

In considering the type of engagement an organization wishes to have, purpose and outcomes are essential. Holding regular convenings is important for organizations that share similar policy goals, but also seek to make real change in their field. By including a wide variety of organizations in discussions, action plans and engagements, organizations can expand resources, expertise, and knowledge. Coalitions like these are also able to find strength in numbers when advocating for key policy issues.<sup>2</sup> Each member of the coalition can mobilize its broader network using avenues like campaigns, social media,



Pictured from left to right: Jean Eddy, President & CEO of American Student Assistance (ASA); J.D. LaRock, President & CEO of the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE); and Julie Lammers, Executive Vice President at ASA, at the ASA Work-Based Learning Leadership Forum held in February 2025.

<sup>1</sup> American Student Assistance. (n.d.). Work-based learning leaders forum. Retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://www.asa.org/events/workbased-learning-leaders-forum/>

and knowledgeable board members. Pooling resources, reaching wider audiences, and distributing workloads makes policy advocacy goals more attainable.



Leaders from all over the country convene for the ASA Work-Based Learning Leadership Forum (pictured above) to discuss and explore all areas of work-based learning (see below.)



One essential feature of the ASA convening was its participatory roundtables, which covered topics ranging from policy barriers that hinder the expansion of work-based learning to strategies for engaging school systems and employer partners. Industry experts facilitated each roundtable discussion and led activities designed to build relationships among participants. In addition to networking opportunities, the event also featured student speakers who shared their personal experiences with the work-based learning model.

“Our goal with this event was to elevate the challenges of providing access to youth work-based learning for all learners—especially those in marginalized or underserved communities—by building a coalition of action-oriented leaders composed of educators, solution providers, employers, and community leaders,” explains Julie Lammers, Executive Vice President of ASA. “Our intent moving forward is to share research, best practices and promising models, as well as to spark healthy discussions on what it would take to implement systemic change, remove barriers, and scale solutions.”

“Systemic change is only possible when organizations work in coalition with each other,” said NFTE President & CEO, J.D. LaRock. “Given the prominence of work-based learning and career-connected education in the agendas of many states as well as the federal government, this is the best moment in a generation to utilize coalitions to advance systemic change.”

## Challenges Facing Organizations

While every organization is different, similar themes emerged from the roundtable discussions. Organizations cited several challenges they face when engaging in policy and advocacy work and that it is difficult to proactively work toward policy goals. Many entities also struggle with the current political climate as they remain non-partisan but contemplate which political events to address. National organizations like NFTE and ASA must also evaluate their programs on a state-by-state basis, as requirements can vary across the country and even by district.

## Recommendations for Organizations

The essential focus of this convening was not just highlighting the challenges but also giving organizations the opportunity to work together and be solutions-oriented to build consensus through deep discussion. “Often we see organizations working in silos, trying to tackle the same issues as they work to provide high-quality programming to kids,” says Lammers of ASA. “We thought this was an important opportunity to get mission-aligned organizations together to begin building relationships and align work for better collaboration. Only by working together will we truly make progress to scale high-quality programs.”

2 Brown, C. (2023, March 16). Coalition-building: Why it matters and how to start. National College Attainment Network. <https://www.ncan.org/news/635812/Coalition-Building-Why-it-Matters-and-How-to-Start.htm>

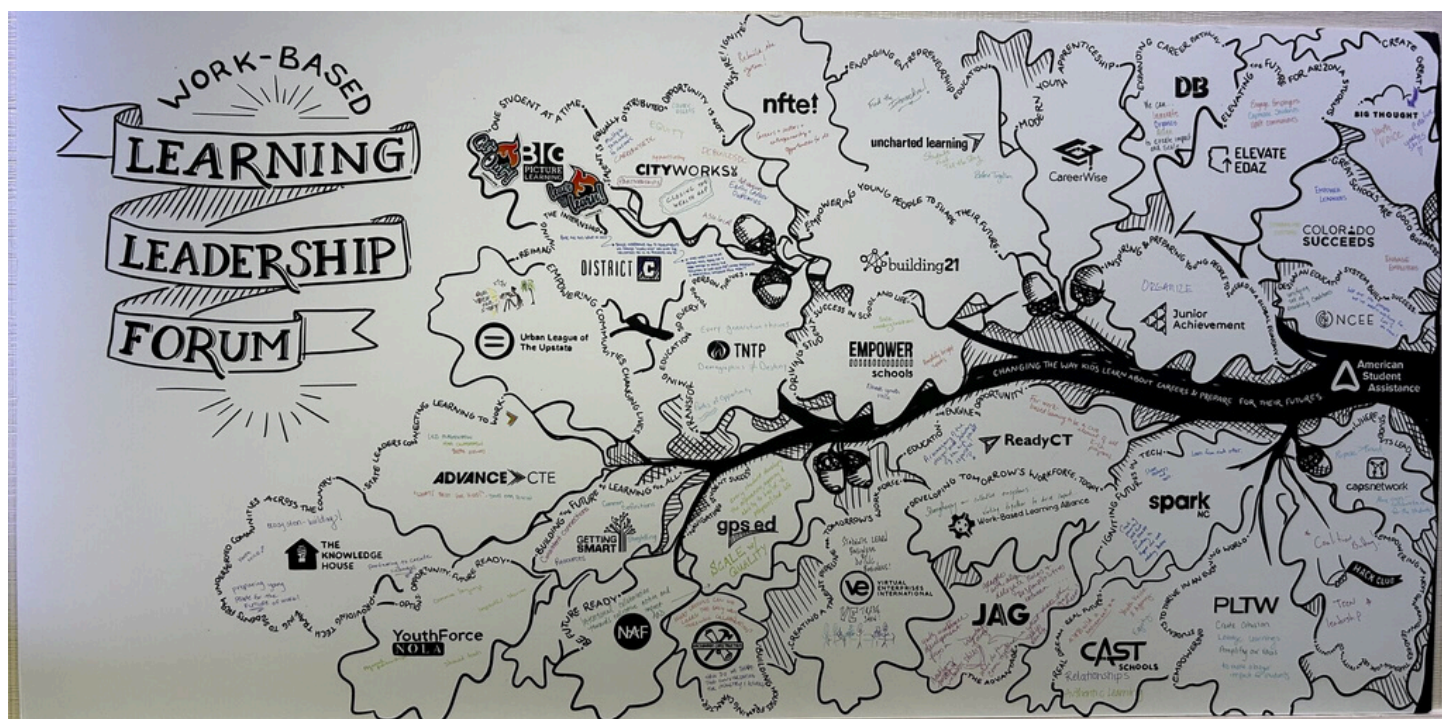


Throughout the discussion, attendees broadly agreed policy work is essential, and that policy and advocacy must happen at the national, state, and local levels. Below is a highlight of the solutions these organizations collected:

**Coalition Building:** Partnerships and coalition building are vital to producing the greatest impacts. Each organization provides a unique set of resources and expertise to the larger coalition and increases the potential for meaningful results. Hosting convenings, like the one hosted by ASA, gives leaders a chance to build long-term relationships and provide a dedicated space to share their entities' challenges and solutions.

**Use of Advocacy Efforts:** Regulatory changes and implementation are a meaningful and effective objective of advocacy. Some organizations rely on federal funding, which is susceptible to change. Regulatory changes also affect the work organizations produce, so understanding and advocating for policies favorable to work-based learning is a priority.

**Continue to articulate the ROI for programs to schools and employers:** Policy can't change unless you first make the case that change is necessary. Attendees stressed that there is still a need to better articulate the return on investment for schools and employers to establish work-based learning programs. These programs help students engage with learning and build the skills and self-confidence young people need to thrive. They are not nice to have – they are necessary for long-term success.



All of the organizations in attendance at the ASA Work-Based Learning Leadership Forum are represented on this map, which shows how ASA helps support their work.

The ASA Work-Based Learning Leaders Forum demonstrated the power of purposeful convenings to drive systemic change and build momentum through authentic collaboration. Conveners like ASA play an essential role in aligning mission-driven organizations, elevating shared challenges, and advancing policy solutions that make work-based learning more accessible and impactful for the next generation.

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