

How Employer Collaboration Can Jump-Start a High School Talent Pipeline

Pella Region's IT Pathways Program Produces Impressive Results That Could Be Replicated Statewide

What Is It?

Despite the need, understanding how to recruit talent out of high school can be challenging for employers, especially for information technology (IT) skills. The IT Pathways Program provides a structured way for employers to begin to identify that talent and to find out whether students are a good fit, but the benefits are broader. For students, it's a real-world opportunity to explore whether IT is the right career for them. For communities, it showcases that great jobs from committed businesses are available locally, making it more likely young people will end up living and working close to home.



The program combines selective screening, a summer training camp and apprenticeship, leading to impressive results: Nearly 68% of students who have completed are working full time for their IT Pathways employers or attending college and working part time for those employers. Launched in 2020 by WorkSMART Connector, a collaboration of Marion County businesses and educators led by Director Teri Vos, the model could be replicated statewide.

“When we started the whole concept...we were looking at economic development data...and really found out that there was a need for IT,” said Vos. “And it didn’t take us long to have those conversations and learn that the employers were validating that and saying ‘Yes, if there is a way to develop a new talent pipeline with high school students, we’d love to be doing that alongside you.’”

This playbook is intended to serve as a guide for employers and schools interested in launching their own IT Pathways Program, or similar programs for other careers paths. A list of the steps involved is below. If you would like to discuss developing a model that could work in your community, contact information is at the end of the playbook. Please reach out to let us know how we can assist.

Why do this?

The IT Pathways Program is a community workforce development strategy that benefits everyone. “Pella has a long-standing focus on both talent as well as community, and when this opportunity came about, it was just a great combination,” said Travis Turnbull, Vice President and CIO at Pella Corporation.

The results show a successful model

Between spring 2020 and spring 2026, eight businesses selected 42 students to participate. Of 31 who had completed the program by April 2026, 11 were hired into full-time employment and 10 were working part time while attending college. Another 10 who completed the program went in another direction. Another 11 students were either currently enrolled in the program or had signed up to participate in summer 2026.

How the IT Pathways Program works

Step 1

Junior year recruitment: Each fall, WorkSMART Connector, based at the Career Academy of Pella, partners with high schools in Marion County to encourage them to recruit candidates interested in being considered by employers in the spring. That is followed by students preparing resumes and practicing interviews. Taking computer science courses is not a prerequisite but may help, as the process is competitive and interest sometimes exceeds spots available.

Step 2

Interviews with employers. In the spring, employers interview interested students and rank them. Businesses typically each take one to three students, working toward the goal of creating a cohort of about eight students each year. Employers agree to pay the same starting wage for all participants.

Step 3

Orientation and signing ceremony. Near the end of junior year, the selected students attend orientation with employers. A signing ceremony is attended by parents and other supporters in the community. Employers equip students with laptops, software, and other essentials to get started.

Step 4

Summer training camp, followed by summer employment. Students then attend a two-week camp at Central College, where they earn college credit studying a curriculum co-designed by employers and Professor Stephen Fyfe. Grants typically cover tuition. At the end of camp, students make presentations to employers and parents before heading into work experiences with the businesses that picked them. For the rest of that summer, students work a minimum of 240 hours, also for college credit, and continue to develop skills toward earning the program's locally designed IT Specialist Certificate. Then, a second round of presentations follows the summer work experiences, and new and experienced apprentices are encouraged to network.

Step 5

Senior year employment. During senior year, students work 10-15 hours per week with the same businesses, toward the goal of 108 hours per semester or 216 hours over the school year. Assigned mentors provide ongoing support. Apprentices' work is expected to generate real value.

Step 6

Ongoing assessment and support. During the school year, Vos meets with employers every other month to assess and improve the program. Fyfe joins to discuss what to add to the curriculum, and what to remove. Vos meets with students at least twice a semester and is available anytime in between.

Step 7

Post-graduation employment and certification. Following high school graduation, students work another 240 hours and upon completion are awarded the local IT Specialist Certificate at a community ceremony. Employers then decide whether to offer them full-time jobs and, if they do, the graduates have an immediate option for a new career in their community.



Testimonial

Jonathan Frost, 20, who started as an apprentice and now works full time as an Associate Technical Analyst at Pella Corporation, had this advice for high school students considering similar opportunities: “I don’t think you need too much prior knowledge or anything. Everyone at your company will be helpful in getting you set up and teaching you everything...You just have to be prepared to do your best, really. You have to commit to working hard and asking questions and trying.”



Thank you to Marion County’s WorkSMART Connector Program, Pella Corporation and Central College for collaborating to produce the playbook and video.

If you have questions about starting your own IT Pathways Program:

Employers are welcome to contact:

- Teri Vos, Director, Work-Based Learning, WorkSMART Connector, teri.vos@pellaschools.org
- Kathy Leggett, Business Engagement Liaison, Iowa Workforce Development:
kathy.leggett@iwd.iowa.gov

Schools are welcome to contact:

- Jodie Smith, Education Consultant, Work-Based-Learning and Industry-Recognized Credentials, Iowa Department of Education, jodie.smith@iowa.gov