



Iowa Workforce
Development

Playbook: Creating and Implementing Your Earn-and-Learn Program

Impressive success by healthcare employers who have pioneered earn-and-learn models led Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) to create this guide for other employers considering additional strategies to meet workforce needs. While the guide focuses on nursing, the framework is applicable to multiple healthcare occupations. The intent is to distill initial key steps based on insights from employers who have started their own programs in recent years and plan to continue them, along with recruiting from conventional sources. Successful development and implementation require a major organizational commitment on many levels. Strong leadership is needed to develop the internal administrative infrastructure and external partnerships that support programs. Workplace culture must change because earn-and-learn models are nontraditional pathways involving more collaboration among existing employees and apprentices or participants. Figuring out financial feasibility is essential to ensure sustainability.

Employers who have done this said the work is worth it. Adopting earn-and-learn models has enhanced recruiting, readiness and retention, they said. We are grateful for their willingness to share lessons learned.

For more information, please contact: Kathy Leggett, IWD Business Engagement Liaison, at kathy.leggett@iwd.iowa.gov. IWD welcomes the opportunity to work with healthcare organizations interested in learning more about these models.



Beginning Considerations

Before launching an earn-and-learn initiative, gather key information and reflect on the following areas:

Key Tip: Learn from Others

- Connect with organizations that have implemented successful programs to learn from them. Need help connecting? Contact kathy.leggett@iwd.iowa.gov
- Recruitment and retention needs – Identify occupations with persistent recruitment or retention challenges. These roles may be ideal starting points.
- Contracted staff – Consider whether earn-and-learn could replace positions currently filled with contracted workers, such as travel nurses.
- Leadership support – Strong support from respected internal leaders is essential. Determine who can champion the program and its participants.
- Organizational mission – Clarify how earn-and-learn fits within your mission and long-term workforce strategy.
- Organizational culture – Recognize that earn-and-learn represents a shift from traditional training pathways. Prepare strategies to build staff understanding, support, and trust.
- Funding – Identify available funding sources such as operating budgets, foundation support, tuition assistance programs, grants, or other resources.



Team Development

Successful implementation requires a unified, cross-functional team.

- Identify team members who will design, launch, and oversee the program.
- Consider early adopters or highly respected leaders who can drive momentum.
- Core team members often include representatives from organizational leadership, department leadership, clinical education and human resources.
- Designate a program manager responsible for day-to-day oversight.
- Ensure support and engagement from mentors, clinical preceptors and department supervisors because these roles are vital to participant success.

Key Tip: Communication

- Communication among team members and by team members with participants and external partners (education programs) is critical.
- Organizations implementing these models share with participants that this is new and we will work through it together.



Program Development

- Define the program's purpose and intended outcomes.
- Align the program with current and future workforce needs.
- Select a program model (registered apprenticeship or other earn-and-learn). These similar approaches combine related education with paid on-the-job training; registered apprenticeships also lead to a nationally recognized credential. Whatever the pathway, the same licensing requirements must be met.

Related Education: Selecting an Education Partner

Research education partners and assess how well their programs align with your organizational needs.

- Licensing requirements – Ensure the model meets state requirements for occupations requiring licensure.
- Program structure – Review timelines, course availability, start dates, prerequisites, costs, flexibility and accessibility for employees.
- Programs for RN and LPN – [Click here](#) for the lists of Iowa Board of Nursing approved education programs.

For other healthcare occupations, apply similar evaluation criteria. A simple online search can identify potential programs and education partners.

On-the-Job Training

- Identify required competencies for participants, working collaboratively with your education partner.
- Determine who will oversee clinical requirements and where they will occur. Some healthcare organizations host clinical experiences onsite, or clinicals may take place in various locations. At least one innovative model allows nurses to serve as adjunct instructors, making it easier for apprentices to do their clinicals on site.
- Develop a structured on-the-job training plan that meets all requirements. Consider value-added experiences, such as job shadowing, practicing clinical skills and exposure to related departments (e.g., scheduling, electronic medical records).
- Competency-based models can provide apprentices/participants the opportunity to perform skills on patients under appropriate supervision during the education and training program, elevating their skill building and confidence as they advance through their programs.

Resource: [The U.S. Department of Labor/Office of Apprenticeship](#) offers a comprehensive library of vetted occupational competencies

Key Tip: Consider Program Cohorts

- Several employers have seen added benefits when implementing training cohorts when possible because participants support and encourage each other.
- Participants create a supportive bond, helping and encouraging each other.

**Participant Recruitment**

- Define participant eligibility (e.g., any prerequisites, minimum length of employment, performance expectations, supervisor recommendations, internal-only or community-accessible opportunities, or both).
- Establish a clear application process (submission steps, initial review, final decision-making committee, waiting list procedures).
- Determine whether employment commitments will be required after program completion.
- Create a communication strategy to promote the opportunity (supervisor announcements, flyers, etc.).

Participant Support

- Develop a participant tracking system to monitor progress in coursework and clinical training.
- Clearly outline participant expectations.
- Consider offering supports shown to improve success:
 - Study groups
 - Regular check-ins between participants and mentors
 - Course progress tracking
 - Academic support for struggling participants (problem-solving, tutoring, encouragement)
 - Access to computers, internet, uniforms, covering testing fees
 - Flexibility to help participants balance work, school, and life events

Ongoing Evaluation

- Hold regular leadership team meetings to review progress and discuss challenges.
- Seek feedback from staff and participants and be prepared to adjust as needed.

Key Tip: Practice Patience

- Implementation of earn-and-learn models takes time and mistakes will be made.
- Be willing to adapt the program as needed.