

## **Testimony for Brad Rhorer, President and CEO, Ascend Indiana Senate HELP Subcommittee on Employment & Workplace Safety**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to speak to you about youth apprenticeships today. My name is Brad Rhorer, and I am President and CEO of Ascend Indiana, a statewide initiative focused on ensuring Indiana employers have the talent needed to thrive and every Indiana citizen has the opportunity to pursue a meaningful career.

Talent development is personal to me not only as a representative of Ascend Indiana, but as a 25-year automotive manufacturing professional who has spent a good portion of my career creating talent pathways for one of Indiana's largest manufacturers.

Indiana is not unlike any other state in the nation facing a persistent talent shortfall. Hoosier leaders are all too familiar with the data: a concerning statewide labor force participation rate hovering at 64%, an alarming 75% of Indiana employers who cannot find enough qualified candidates to fill open positions, an aging population preparing for retirement, and a strained talent pipeline that only worsened during the pandemic.

Indiana, however, is among the few states in the nation actively scaling up a proven solution: youth apprenticeships. Indiana has established a coalition of stakeholders from philanthropic organizations, chambers, education, industry and the public sector to design and implement youth apprenticeships across the state in order to prepare more high school students for in-demand careers making up today's workforce. Our goal is to scale apprenticeship programs statewide to ensure every student has access to high-quality education and training options by 2030.

Indiana leaders began learning about Switzerland's dual vocational education and training (VET) system in 2016 through convenings led by the bipartisan National Conference of State Legislatures and funded by the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation. Switzerland's system is considered the "gold standard" for educating young people and meeting labor market demand, with about 70% of Swiss youth participating in a three- or four-year paid apprenticeship spanning the entire labor market, totaling about 180,000 people ages 16 to 19.

Drawing on the best practices from the Swiss VET system, in 2019 Indiana collaboratively developed a plan to begin implementing a youth apprenticeship system through the launch of pilot modern youth apprenticeship programs and the creation of a statewide Community of Practice (COP) to remove barriers to implementing and scaling these programs.

Indiana's youth apprenticeship programs begin in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and average three years with students earning a high school diploma, college credit and an industry credential upon completion. These year-round, paid employment experiences span many industries, including insurance, business services, life sciences, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing. Today, five pilot programs are operating and have placed more than 400 students with more than 50 employers. There are five more pilot programs that are currently in the planning phase with the support of Ascend Indiana and have plans to launch in 2025. Finally, the statewide COP engages 125 members across 60 organizations to continue to discuss how Indiana can scale youth apprenticeship opportunities in Indiana.

Through the youth apprenticeship pilot programs, Indiana leaders have identified common implementation challenges:

- Businesses view youth apprenticeship as corporate social responsibility instead of a core component of the employer's talent recruitment, development, and retention strategies,
- Youth apprenticeships are layered on top of existing high school coursework, making it difficult for students to have consistent, dedicated work hours at the employer site,
- Communities lack reliable transportation solutions for students to travel to workplaces,
- High schools have limited career counseling capacity, impeding awareness of the variety of career pathways available in Indiana, and
- A lack of industry-defined competencies that are developed by employers and enable consistency of experiences and, ultimately, the ability to scale.

As Hoosiers, we always come together, collectively solve challenges and map out the best path forward. That's just how we do things in Indiana. To scale youth apprenticeship programs statewide, Indiana is well on its way. We have collectively identified short-term priorities such as establishing a governing committee to oversee strategic planning, implementation, and sustainability and an operational structure that delineates the roles of private, public, and nonprofit partners. Another priority is to identify policies that hamper scaling youth apprenticeships and to address barriers.

One significant step that was taken in 2023 by the Indiana General Assembly was legislation that defined Modern Youth Apprenticeship and requires two semesters of academic instruction, 650 work hours, paid experience, postsecondary credits and potential credential attainment. This enables consistency of program implementation, and it starts to ensure a bar for quality.

It's important that all youth – nationwide – have access to apprenticeships. Indiana's coalition has made significant progress to give youth equal access to career opportunities and businesses access to skilled talent. But, to scale apprenticeships here in Indiana – and nationwide – the coalition believes the youth apprenticeship system needs:

- 1). A framework and definition of youth apprenticeship that is output oriented. It is vital that the framework allows for flexibility in program design to meet community needs.
- 2). An employer-led model. Youth apprenticeships need to be defined at a high level, so employers are clear about their role in the ecosystem. This allows them to best identify where to invest and develop capacity. Additionally, industry associations need to engage and provide input on the development of an occupation. Funding from the federal government could help states define occupation mapping at a state-level.
- 3). Easy access for employers and students. This includes funding that supports career advising services and the delivery of those services through multiple channels, transportation, wrap-around services and building capacity with intermediaries to help students and employers navigate the system.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the journey Indiana is taking with its coalition. I hope our experience – and our progress – provides you with the information needed to find ways to make youth apprenticeship programs available to students and businesses across the nation.