

# Policy Brief

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# Table of Contents

1	Title Page
2	Table of Contents
3	Acknowledgements
4	Introduction
5	The Challenge: A Perfect Storm in Workforce Readiness
6	National Labor Challenges in the Age of AI
7	The WIN-NextGen™ Solution Framework
9	Brand Focus: STEM
11	Brand Focus: Supply Chain
16	Brand Focus: Skilled Trades
18	Brand Focus: AI Incubator™
21	Brand Focus: Girls Action Network® (GAN)
23	Student Athlete Community
25	Home School Community
26	Federal Policy Recommendations
30	Call to Action
31	Conclusion
34	Endnotes
38	Sources

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# Introduction



**Elisa Basnight, Founder & CEO, WIN-NextGen™**

The United States is undergoing a transformative shift in the workforce landscape. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital technologies are changing the nature of work across sectors. At the same time, the country faces alarming labor shortages—especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades careers. The convergence of these challenges has revealed a national need: a modern, technology-powered workforce development strategy that starts earlier, engages deeper, and moves faster.

WIN-NextGen™ is answering that call. Building upon a 20-year legacy of a grassroots STEM youth program, WIN launched in June 2025 to help cultivate NextGen talent (ages 13–24), inspire new career aspirations, and build scalable capacity across the 3S Workforce™—STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades.

WIN-NextGen™ bridges the gap between aspiration and opportunity through five mission-aligned brands: STEM, Supply Chain, Skilled Trades, AI Incubator™, and Girls Action Network® (GAN). Each brand provides NextGens with meaningful, tech-integrated career exposure and navigation tools designed to strengthen our nation's workforce pipeline—the backbone of America's long-term economic resilience.

What sets WIN-NextGen™ apart is our co-creator approach: we invite employers, educators, and community partners not just to support our work, but to shape it. Through this model, industry leaders become mentors, content contributors, and pathway architects—actively helping our NextGens, prepare, and connect with real-world opportunities.

As a dual-purpose platform, WIN-NextGen™ operates both as a SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) solution for youth, delivering gamified career development, and as a WaaS (Workforce-as-a-Service) model for employers and institutions, providing a dynamic, measurable way to engage future talent early and effectively.

To the many contributors, champions, and partners who helped bring this vision to life—thank you. Your insights, encouragement, and belief in the power of young people are fueling a movement that is reshaping workforce development in the AI era and beyond.

Now, we invite others to join us. Whether you are a funder, policymaker, educator, or employer, WIN-NextGen™ offers a powerful way to co-create the future. Together, we can build the pipelines our economy demands and the future that our NextGens deserve.

— Elisa Basnight, Founder & CEO, WIN-NextGen™

# The Challenge: A Perfect Storm in Workforce Readiness

- **Demographic Headwinds:** The U.S. Chamber of Commerce analyzed employment data from the past twenty years and identified an aging workforce, early retirements, decreasing immigration, lack of access to affordable childcare, and trends in lower birthrates as contributing to the current labor shortage.<sup>1</sup> The skilled trades and STEM fields are particularly affected by these demographic shifts.
- **Digital Disruption:** AI and automation are reshaping job tasks across all sectors, requiring new skillsets with an estimate that 30% of the hours currently worked in the US will be performed by AI by 2030.<sup>2</sup> Globally, over 85% of companies surveyed by the World Economic Forum anticipate adopting new technology and increasing digital access within the next five years.<sup>3</sup>
- **Barriers to Access:** Many young people—especially those in rural areas, low-income communities, and under-resourced schools—face significant challenges in career readiness. Rural students often lack access to advanced coursework, career exploration opportunities, adequate internet, and counseling services, limiting their preparation for high-growth careers.<sup>4</sup>

# National Labor Challenges in the Age of AI



The United States is experiencing a historic transformation in how we work, driven by rapid technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital infrastructure. At the center of this shift is the 3S Workforce™—STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades—fields that are foundational to national security, economic growth, and access to opportunities.

However, the country faces severe shortages of qualified workers in these industries. The World Economic Forum estimates that nearly **40%** of workers globally will require reskilling by 2030 due to technology disruptions.<sup>5</sup> Korn Ferry projects a global talent **shortage of 85 million workers by 2030**, with the U.S. facing critical labor gaps across core sectors.<sup>6</sup>

U.S.-specific projections include:

- 3.8 million additional workers are needed by 2033 and that as many as “1.9 million of these [manufacturing] jobs could go unfilled...”<sup>7</sup>
- 2.1 million skilled trades vacancies, including HVAC, plumbing, welding<sup>8</sup>
- Between 59,000 and 146,000 semiconductor roles are at risk of going unfilled<sup>9</sup>
- Up to 12 million occupational transitions due to AI and automation<sup>10</sup>

# The WIN-NextGen™ Solution Framework

## Who We Are

- WIN-NextGen™ is a workforce innovation network that leverages technology to cultivate NextGen talent (ages 13–24), inspire, and build capacity for interconnected pipelines across the 3S Workforce™ —STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades—in the AI era and beyond.
- We're not just another youth program —we're an **innovation engine** for workforce readiness in the age of AI.

## Who We Serve

- We work with young people ages **13 to 24**, a critical window for career discovery, skills development, and opportunity access.
- WIN-NextGen™ serves all youth, honoring the belief that **every young person has unique talents to cultivate** for leadership and contribution in the future workforce.



## The WIN-NextGen™ Solution Framework (continued)

### What We Focus On: The 3S Workforce™

- We center our efforts around the **3S Workforce™—STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades**—three essential, interdependent sectors driving our economy and infrastructure.
- These fields are being rapidly reshaped by AI, and we're making sure young people are **ready to lead and thrive** now and in the future.

### What We Do

- We **leverage smart technology** to engage youth through interactive platforms, gamified experiences, digital mentoring, and AI-powered tools.
- We focus on **“future-ready” skillsets holistically**, blending **hard, tech-forward, and soft skills**.



As Anjali Shaikh from Deloitte points out, “Many new roles [in the AI era] are likely to combine technical expertise with so-called soft skills such as emotional intelligence and critical thinking.”<sup>11</sup>

This underscores why **WIN-NextGen™** emphasizes a holistic skillset—one that balances technical proficiency, digital fluency, and interpersonal strengths.

- WIN-NextGen™ offers a systems-level approach by integrating digital career exploration, real-world training, mentorship, and industry engagement into a unified framework that aligns with local, state, and national workforce needs.

# Brand Focus: STEM

STEM jobs are projected to grow 10.4% between 2023 and 2033 — nearly three times faster than non-STEM jobs — yet millions may go unfilled due to a persistent skills gap.<sup>12</sup>

STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics— interdisciplinary fields that each provide foundational knowledge for many careers within the supply chain and skilled trades, and collectively, power innovation, productivity, and global competitiveness across every industry.

The Census Bureau reported in 2021 that **62% of individuals with STEM bachelor's degrees** were not employed in STEM fields.<sup>13</sup> The Census Bureau authors cite this as a “startling statistic” that “highlights the deeper structural issues within education and workforce alignment, including the underutilization of STEM talent and the variability in career outcomes based on specific majors.”<sup>14</sup> WIN-NextGen™ suggests that this statistic can also be an opportunity when viewed through a systems-mindset of the nation's need for STEM degrees across the 3S Workforce™ – STEM, Supply Chain, and the Skilled Trades in the AI era. NextGens who go into STEM-adjacent workforce careers also rely on STEM education and training, which is a win for our nation's workforce pipelines and competitiveness.



"The future of STEM careers demands not just sharp minds, but strong, resilient individuals. **WIN-NextGen™**'s whole-person approach empowers youth to intellectually and personally thrive, preparing them for long-term success in any industry."

— Shelly Williams, Healthcare Executive & Fitness Advocate

"Radiologic technology is a powerful and often overlooked career. **WIN-NextGen™** can play a vital role in helping young learners—especially those without exposure to healthcare careers—see themselves in these critical, high-opportunity roles."

— Michelle Bragg, ARRT-Certified Radiologic Technologist & Mentor



### Sector Snapshot: Healthcare & the Radiologic Technologist Crisis

**Situation:** The healthcare sector is facing severe imaging workforce shortages. Radiologic technologist vacancy rates have surged from 6.2% in 2021 to 18.1% in 2024, jeopardizing patient care and diagnostic timelines.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, regional vacancy rates across medical imaging and radiation therapy approach ~19%, according to the American Society of Radiologic Technologists.<sup>16</sup>

**Challenges:** These gaps are exacerbated by aging populations and expanding healthcare demand. Yet few youth are aware of these high-opportunity, mid-skill roles—especially in rural and underrepresented communities.

**Action:** WIN-NextGen™'s career awareness and training model offers a blueprint to fill these gaps through a systems approach with aligned tech-based tools, exposure, partnerships with employers, educational and accreditation institutions, and early mentorship.

# Brand Focus: Supply Chain



## ***Powering Progress Through Supply Chain and Innovation***

The term “supply chain” is frequently used but rarely understood. More than just a buzzword, the supply chain represents the **backbone of global commerce and national resilience** — spanning logistics, transportation, procurement, inventory management, and operational technologies. The supply chain powers everything — from raw materials to final delivery — across sectors from healthcare to energy to manufacturing, yet remains underrepresented in career guidance, curricula, and public awareness. WIN-NextGen™ helps decode and illuminate this high-impact sector.

### What Is Supply Chain?

Domain	Why It Matters
Procurement	Smart purchasing, contracts, and risk management
Import/ Export	Trade, tariffs, and customer brokerage
Transportation	Talent gaps as drivers and logistics professionals retire
Supplier Relationships	Vital partnerships for resilience and continuity
S&OP & Logistics	Aligning operations, forecasting and execution

Amid aging infrastructure and a wave of retirements, **supply chain workforce gaps are widening**. According to the 2024 MHI and Deloitte Industry Report, over **50% of supply chain executives** cite recruiting and retaining qualified talent as their greatest challenge aside from inflation.<sup>17</sup>

E-commerce expansion, digitalization, and automation only heighten the urgency to prepare NextGen workers with essential and adaptable skills. To activate interest and understanding among youth and young adults, the supply chain must be **demystified** into tangible, high-impact domains:

- **Procurement** — smart purchasing, contract management, supplier risk
- **Import/Export** — global trade, tariffs, customs brokerage
- **Transportation** — freight and delivery logistics amid workforce retirements
- **Supplier Relationships** — strategic partnerships essential for resiliency
- **Operations & Logistics Execution** — planning, forecasting, and S&OP processes

## Brand Focus: Supply Chain (continued)

### WIN-NextGen™: Building the Talent Pipeline

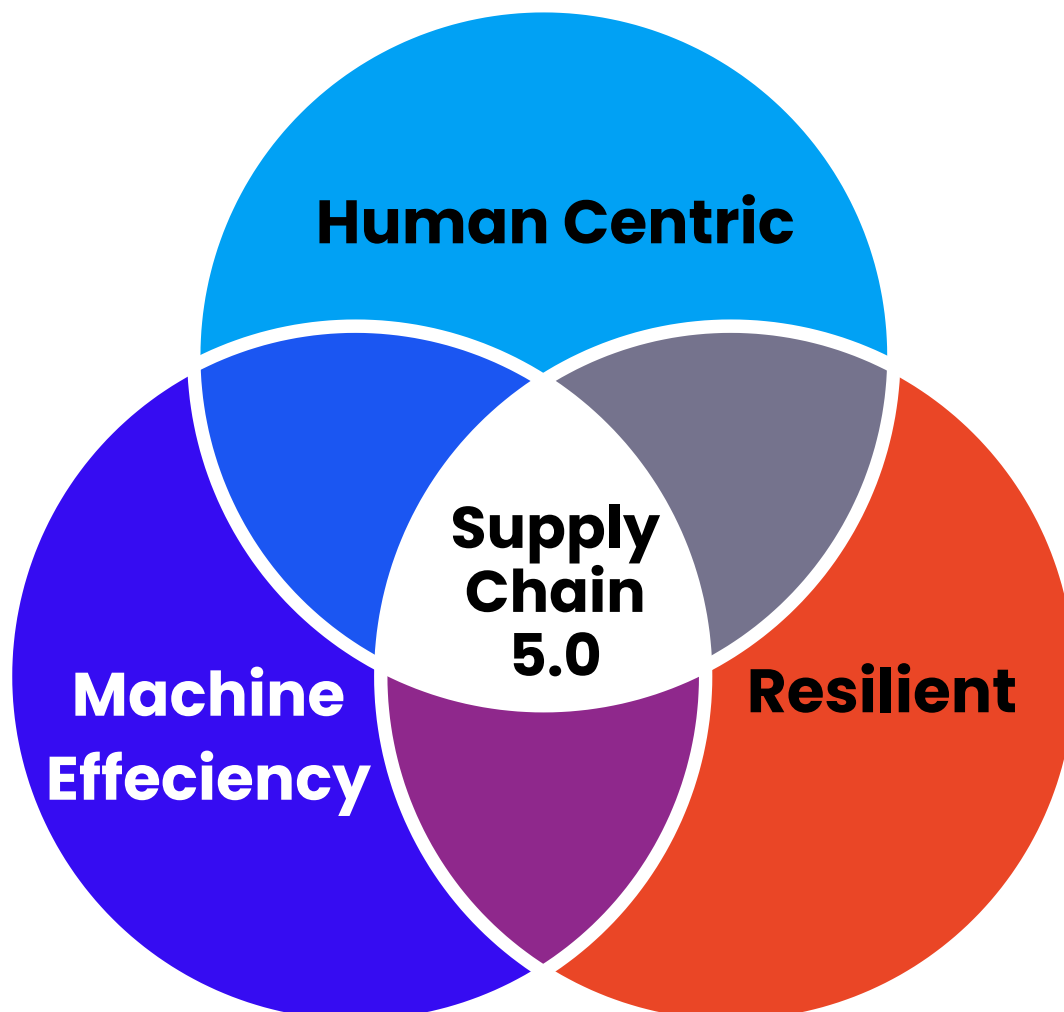
Through strategic partnerships, early programming, and learner-centered design, **WIN-NextGen™ is laying the foundation** for a new era of supply chain awareness and skill development.

“Companies that are future focused understand that technology alone is only a partial solution,” says Elisa Basnight, Founder and CEO, WIN-NextGen™ Inc.

“We must pair human creativity with intelligent machine efficiency – building a supply chain that thrives on collaboration between people and machines.”

### Future Focused | Supply Chain 5.0

The Right Mix of Human Creativity & Machine Efficiency



## Brand Focus: Supply Chain (continued)

WIN-NextGen™ is laying the foundation for a new generation of supply chain thinkers and problem-solvers and equipping students with the mindset and momentum to thrive in a modern, innovation-driven economy.

### WIN-NextGen™'s Path to Make a Difference

Pillar	WIN-NextGen™ Focus
Career Visibility	Introduce learners to essential supply chain roles
Skills Development	Build foundational knowledge in logistics, sourcing, planning
Industry Engagement	Co-design modules with real-world employer input
Systems Thinking	Help learners understand how supply chain roles interconnect
Technology Integration	Prepare students for automation, digital platforms, and analytics



## Brand Focus: Supply Chain (continued)

### Sector Snapshot: Pandemic Lessons Learned for Future Supply Chains

#### Jennifer Schauble

Executive Director, Supply Chain  
Venatorx Pharmaceuticals, Inc.



**Background:** COVID-19 spotlighted vulnerabilities in supply chains. Jennifer Schauble, Executive Director, Supply Chain at Venatorx Pharmaceuticals, Inc. and WIN-NextGen™ Advisory Council member, explains the challenges her prior company faced during this unprecedented time:

**Challenges:** “We rapidly realized at the start of the pandemic in 2020 as a one product company that we had some potential weak links in our supply chain. We had previously relied too heavily on commercial airlines to move our product from the final point of manufacture in Europe to the US with just in time deliveries to minimize the safety stock we held; we quickly reacted, expedited production, and moved additional product to the US on whatever commercial flights we could find. We leaned in on our already cultivated supplier relationships, and we talked with our manufacturing partners almost daily while we worked out the production schedules. We acted quickly and we made sure that we had enough stock of our life and limb saving product here in the US waiting for patients. Those trying times accentuated the need for seamless logistics, a strong S&OP process, well developed partnerships, and a solid transportation network.” Schauble explains further that, “Moving forward, why WIN-NextGen™ is important is that we need organizations to lead efforts to cultivate our young people’s knowledge to understand the supply chain function from start to finish. They need to understand the bridge from strategy to tactical so issues can be identified and remedied before they occur.”

**Action:** At this stage, WIN-NextGen™ is laying the groundwork for systems-aware skill development that connects educational content with economic relevance. WIN-NextGen™ works side-by-side with educators and industry leaders to co-create future-aligned modules that will support learner success in distribution, inventory analytics, sourcing, and operations — all critical pillars of national productivity and resilience.

# Brand Focus: Skilled Trades

## *Building a Stronger, Tech-Enabled Workforce*

Skilled Trades remain essential to America's infrastructure and economy yet face critical shortages. From welding and electrical work to HVAC, plumbing, and advanced manufacturing, skilled trades roles are aging out faster than they are being replenished.



"The construction trades thrive on mentorship and hands-on skill-building. **WIN-NextGen™** has the potential to introduce young people to these crafts earlier—while also maintaining a long-term outlook that supports their growth from education to employment. It's about planting the seed early and walking with them all the way to the jobsite."

— Robert Poirier, Master Carpenter & Construction Industry Leader

## Brand Focus: Skilled Trades (continued)

According to a Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute report, the U.S. manufacturing industry could see a net need for as many as 3.8 million jobs by 2033.<sup>18</sup> However, up to 1.9 million of these jobs could go unfilled if manufacturers are unable to address the skills gap and applicant gap.<sup>19</sup>

WIN-NextGen™ is helping to address this challenge by building partnerships that strengthen and expand training pipelines—supporting new apprenticeship programs, work-based learning, and career exploration aligned with today's evolving trades. From entry points to long-term pathways, WIN-NextGen™ engages the full ecosystem—students, families, educators, employers, and changemakers—to modernize perceptions and elevate skilled trades as a future-forward career choice.

Additional challenges include:

- Skilled trades roles across the **automotive, construction, and allied health** sectors—such as **radiologic technologists, lab technicians, and dental hygienists**—are in high demand, but the pipeline of trained workers is falling short.
- The manufacturing skills gap in the U.S. could result in 2.1 million unfilled jobs by 2030.<sup>20</sup>

"Tomorrow's automotive technicians will need to be fluent in both diagnostics and digital tools. **WIN-NextGen™** aims to create that dual pipeline—connecting youth to careers that power and move our future."

— Joe McCue, Founder of Pencilwrench, Auto Industry Leader & former Auto Technician



WIN-NextGen™ supports members through:

- Pre-apprenticeship digital training
- Exploration and explanation of union and non-union pathways
- Expansion of immersive, tech-enabled learning experiences through the GT3S™ Platform in collaboration with industry partners

# Brand Focus: AI Incubator™

*Fueling Talent for the Intelligence Age*



"AI is transforming entry-level jobs across every sector—from law to logistics. **WIN-NextGen™** provides more than just strategic guidance, it leverages technology to develop a tech savvy and robust workforce for the foreseeable future. As industries navigate disruption, WIN-NextGen™ serves as a vital partner in equipping and empowering the next generation of highly skilled professionals."

— Wilfredo Bonilla, Law Firm Partner & Founder,  
Hispanic Bar Association of Hampton Roads-VA,  
Inc.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is driving a transformation unlike any before — reshaping business models, amplifying innovation, and redefining jobs across industries from healthcare to logistics, finance to skilled trades. Yet this rapid change has exposed a critical gap: the workforce is struggling to keep pace.

"The global workforce is undergoing a seismic shift... Employers are struggling to find workers with the right expertise to fill emerging roles, while many workers feel unprepared for the jobs of the future."<sup>21</sup>

WIN-NextGen™'s **AI Incubator™** is designed to meet this challenge head-on.

## Brand Focus: AI Incubator™ (continued)

### Purpose:

The WIN-NextGen™ **AI Incubator™** is designed to **prepare youth and employers** for success in an AI-powered world. As the world shifts toward intelligent technologies, the AI Incubator™ bridges the gap between **youth potential** and **employer demand** by building pipelines of digitally fluent, ethically grounded early-career talent.

This brand serves a **dual audience**:

- **Youth (ages 13–24)** who seek real-world exposure, digital readiness, and career connection
- **Employers (local, regional, and global)** who need a workforce pipeline of AI-aware, innovation-ready talent and want to co-create the future of responsible AI

### Strategic Objectives

#### A. For Youth

- Increase digital literacy and awareness of AI's impact on careers
- Provide engaging learning pathways and micro-credentials via GT3S™
- Facilitate mentorship and career navigation with AI professionals
- Advance opportunity in participation across geography, race, and income

#### B. For Employers

- Build partnerships for talent development, thought leadership, and innovation
- Engage in co-design of content and experiences aligned to future needs
- Use data and youth feedback to inform inclusive workforce strategies
- Sponsor or support high-impact, scalable models for community investment



## Brand Focus: AI Incubator™ (continued)

According to McKinsey, **up to 30% of work activities** in the U.S. could be automated by 2030.<sup>22</sup> From generative AI to data science, this shift demands new skills and new strategies — not just in coding, but critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital fluency.

WIN-NextGen™ supports early talent development through:

- AI literacy and awareness
- Systems thinking for adaptive careers
- Ethical frameworks for responsible innovation
- Workforce-aligned learning pathways

### Voices Shaping the AI Workforce Future

"The rise of AI is reshaping labor markets faster than policy and education systems can respond. **WIN-NextGen™**'s AI Incubator™ is a timely solution—helping young people build adaptable skills and preparing a future workforce that can thrive amid disruption."

–Sania Khan, Labor Economist & AI Policy Consultant



"We must do more than just introduce young people to AI—we must empower them to lead within it. **WIN-NextGen™**'s AI Incubator™ helps demystify AI and equips the next generation with the knowledge, confidence, and ethics to build inclusive, tech-forward futures."

–Dr. Valerie Nelson, CEO, Training Keys, LLC & AI Literacy & Workforce Strategist



# Brand Focus: Girls Action Network® (GAN)



## ***Shattering Stereotypes & Unlocking Opportunities®***

**GAN—Girls Action Network®** is a flagship WIN–NextGen™ brand dedicated to empowering girls and young women (ages 13–24) to explore and excel in the 3S Workforce™: STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades in the AI era and beyond.

## Brand Focus: Girls Action Network® (GAN) (continued)

"As a two-time **WIN-NextGen™** scholarship recipient, I gained more than financial support—I gained confidence, career exposure, and lifelong connections that helped me grow personally and professionally and realize my full potential. Through GAN, I saw what leadership and purpose really mean."

–Tangiah Wright, Esq., WIN-NextGen™ SSEP Alum, Fulbright Fellow



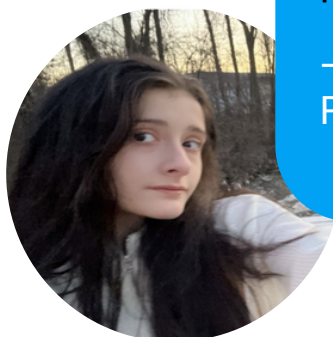
Through a blend of mentorship, career exposure, GT3S™ program training and development, and tech-powered planning tools, GAN addresses persistent barriers to entry and advancement—supporting girls and young women in accessing fields where they remain historically underrepresented. By pairing participants with Career Navigators, partner organizations with curated programming, and creating access to inspiring role models, and hands-on experiences, GAN fosters career confidence, new opportunities, and leadership.

Whether they pursue a STEM pathway, technical trade, or supply chain roles, GAN ensures that girls and young women see themselves not just participating—but leading—in a future shaped by innovation, inclusion, and impact.



"**WIN-NextGen™** gave me the tools to believe in myself—and the power to implement a career I had only ever dreamed of before. The GAN program opened doors and inspired me to keep pushing forward, no matter what."

–Aaliya Torres, 2023 Scholarship Recipient, GAN Program Participant



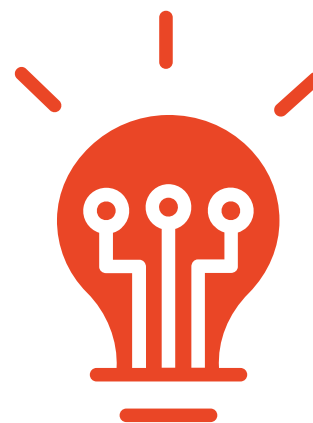
# Student Athlete Community

## ***Playing with Purpose, Preparing with Intention***

To remain globally competitive, the nation must tap into the full potential of its emerging workforce—including student athletes. These individuals bring more than physical skill to the table; they develop discipline, adaptability, and leadership through years of training and competition. Recognizing this, WIN-NextGen™ has launched a dedicated initiative to support student athletes as they prepare for life beyond the competitive arena. Their strengths in collaboration, communication, creative problem-solving, and resilience are exactly the kinds of transferable skills needed in an AI-augmented world.

“Leadership and communication... leadership, communication, teamwork/collaboration, and confidence. I think it helped. As well as just like you get the confidence for... interviews and getting in the position to get a job.”<sup>23</sup>

— *Chance, former college athlete reflecting on how sports prepared him for workplace dynamics*



## Student Athlete Community (continued)

Student athletes represent a significant, often untapped, workforce talent pool. According to the NCAA, over **520,000 student-athletes** compete across U.S. colleges and universities, while millions more participate at the high school level.<sup>24</sup> Yet, only **2%** of college athletes go on to play professionally—making career readiness and workforce exposure critical.<sup>25</sup>

WIN-NextGen™ supports student athletes while they're still training and competing—offering future-ready mobile tools, career exploration, and real-world guidance that align with their unique mindset and goals. This initiative strengthens preparation for the life transitions that follow or accompany athletic careers—ensuring these driven individuals are equipped not just to compete, but to lead and thrive in the 3S Workforce™.



The **3S Workforce™ sectors—STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades—offer natural career pathways for student athletes.** These fields demand many of the same traits honed through athletic experience: focus under pressure, strategic thinking, physical and mental stamina, and the ability to work as part of a team. In particular, many roles within the Skilled Trades—such as construction, electrical work, welding, pit crew work with NASCAR, and heavy equipment operation—offer outdoor environments, physical engagement, and team-based problem-solving, which may appeal to athletes accustomed to training and competing in physically demanding settings. Moreover, from the discipline required in surgical technology and logistics operations, to the problem-solving essential in coding or advanced manufacturing, the 3S Workforce™ sectors can reward the exact habits cultivated through sports.

In collaboration with athletic departments, coaches, sports organizations, and training programs, WIN-NextGen™ can also tailor custom programming to meet the specific needs and aspirations of athletes—helping them explore career pathways that connect their competitive edge with the industries of tomorrow.

# Home School Community

## ***A Powerful and Growing Force for Workforce Readiness***

The homeschool community represents one of the fastest growing and most dynamic education sectors in the United States —with more than 3.7 million homeschooled students across the country representing about 6.73% of all school-age children.<sup>26</sup>

**WIN-NextGen™ recognizes the incredible potential of homeschooled learners**—students who often benefit from strong family engagement, customized learning experiences, and early exposure to self-directed education. These traits make them uniquely prepared for success in the 3S Workforce™—STEM, Supply Chain, and Skilled Trades.

WIN-NextGen™ is committed to collaborate with homeschool networks, co-ops, and parent associations to ensure our tools reflect the flexibility and depth this community values. Our aim is to meet homeschool families where they are and help scale access to future-focused career preparation. From virtual events to credentialing pathways within the GT3S™ Program, the WIN-NextGen™ Home School Community is designed to cultivate skills and curiosity —on students' own terms.

“As a homeschool parent and a developer, I see firsthand how **WIN-NextGen™** is bridging a critical gap—making workforce readiness tools accessible, flexible, and aligned with real industry shifts. This platform respects our need for independence while providing pathways that prepare our kids for leadership in tomorrow's economy.”

— Michael Green, Software Developer & Homeschool Parent



# Federal Policy Recommendation

To build a resilient, broad-based, and future-ready workforce, federal policy must continue to evolve beyond traditional education models and embrace bold, systemic change. The following recommendations outline a strategic framework for federal action, emphasizing early exposure, curricular modernization, alternative pathways, and alignment with national priorities. Each recommendation is designed to address existing gaps while anticipating future labor market demands.

## A. Invest in Early Exposure to the Future of Work

Federal policy should promote **career exploration beginning in grade school**, laying the foundation for students to become increasingly aware of their options as they grow. Early exposure — through interactive lessons, storytelling, and engagement with a broad scope of professions — helps students build curiosity and confidence without requiring premature decisions.

By the time they reach adolescence, students should be equipped to **continue exploring** through structured programs like WIN NextGen™, which supports workforce innovation, 3S Workforce™ education, and digital readiness. Rather than expecting informed choices at age 13, policy should recognize this stage as a **launch point for deeper engagement**, where students begin to connect interests with real-world pathways.

Federal support to states and/or organizations could include grants for scalable models that integrate career labs, mentorship, and industry partnerships in both rural and urban districts — ensuring that early exposure evolves into sustained exploration.



### State-Level Legislation & Practice

- *South Carolina's Education and Economic Development Act* mandates career education beginning in elementary school, with students creating Individual Graduation Plans by middle school.<sup>27</sup>
- *Indiana's Career Exploration Framework* includes career assessments, job shadowing, and digital tools starting in grades 6–8.<sup>28</sup>
- *Pennsylvania's Future Ready PA Index* incorporates middle school career exploration into school accountability metrics.<sup>29</sup>

## B. Modernize Curriculum to Fill Skills Gap

In a 2024 study compiled by Springboard for Business using results from a survey of 1,031 U.S. corporate professionals working at companies with at least 5,000 employees, **70% of business leaders reported critical skills gaps** reduce companies' performance.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, federal policy should incentivize states to **integrate emerging competencies**—including **AI literacy, STEM fluency, and 3S Workforce™ awareness – STEM, supply chain and Skilled Trades awareness**—into K–12 education in ways that reflect students' developmental stages.<sup>31</sup> For example, AI concepts can be taught through logic puzzles and ethical discussions in middle school, then expanded into coding and data analysis in high school. 3S Workforce™ education can begin with classroom simulations and AR/VR journeys that evolve into real-world case studies.

Federal support could include grants for curriculum design, teacher training, integration partners like WIN-NextGen™ and partnerships with industry and higher education.

## Federal Policy Recommendation (continued)

### C. Support Nontraditional Pathways



"Apprenticeships are a proven path to high-skill, high-wage careers—but awareness starts early. **WIN-NextGen™** can help open that door sooner, giving students a clear, hands-on route to success through industry-certified training."

— Connie Russell, CEO, C.L. Russell Group & Certified Apprenticeship Program Director

Much focus has been placed on the development and support of **apprenticeship programs** over recent years. Federal policy should continue to expand access to **apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and certification models** that offer flexible, competency-based learning. These pathways should be available to students as early as high school and continue through postsecondary education and workforce entry.

Reports from the **U.S. Government Accountability Office** highlight that Registered Apprenticeships are linked to **higher wages**, improved retention, and expanded access for underserved youth populations.<sup>32</sup> Independent organizations such as **Jobs for the Future (JFF)** and **Advance CTE** have also outlined comprehensive policy blueprints for scaling youth apprenticeships and integrating them into state and federal education systems.<sup>33</sup>

By embedding these pathways into federal education and labor strategies, we can ensure that students have **multiple, validated routes to success** across industry sectors and regions.

## Federal Policy Recommendation (continued)

### D. Align to Federal Goals

Federal education policy should be intentionally aligned with **national priorities** such as economic competitiveness, technological innovation, and access to mobility. This requires a **unified strategy** that coordinates efforts across agencies, sectors, and regions to build a future-ready workforce.

Policy frameworks should support:

- **Flexible funding mechanisms** that empower states and local entities to innovate<sup>34</sup>
- **Public-private partnerships** that leverage industry expertise and regional strengths<sup>35</sup>
- **Performance metrics** focused on learner outcomes and economic relevance<sup>36</sup>

The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) emphasizes that workforce development must be employer-led, regionally coordinated, and integrated into broader economic strategies. Its guidance on Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) outlines how sectoral partnerships, skills-first training models, and performance-based accountability can strengthen talent pipelines and regional resilience.<sup>37</sup>

By harmonizing education and workforce strategies with these broader goals, federal policy can better equip all learners—regardless of background or geography—to thrive in a dynamic economy and contribute meaningfully to national progress.



# Call to Action: Elevate Youth Workforce Development as National Infrastructure

No matter which side of the political aisle you sit, the background from which you hail, the state in which you are located, the school district you serve, it is time to treat **youth workforce development as essential infrastructure**—as vital to our nation’s prosperity as roads, broadband, and energy. Young people are not just the future; they are the untapped present, brimming with potential to drive innovation, fill critical talent gaps, and shape the industries of tomorrow.<sup>38</sup>

Whether you are a **policymaker, industry leader, educator, parent**, or a **NextGen**, there are multiple ways to engage with WIN-NextGen™ and help build a broad-based, skilled, and purpose-driven workforce. WIN is not just a program—it is a movement to reimagine how we prepare young people for meaningful careers in high-demand sectors.

Visit the *Join Us* page at [win-nextgen.org](http://win-nextgen.org) to explore opportunities to:

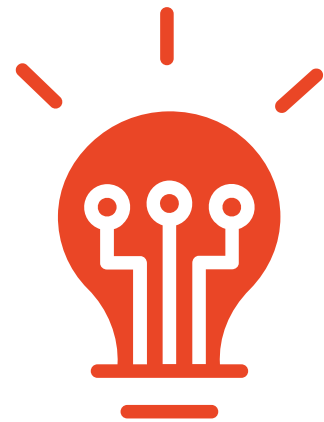
- Become a **member** or **volunteer**
- Partner with WIN on **family, community, regional or national workforce initiatives**
- Support our mission as a **donor or sponsor**
- Advocate for youth workforce development in your community

Together, we can build a national talent pipeline that is **resilient, opportunity-focused, and future-ready**.

# Conclusion: Building a Generation of Purpose-Driven Talent

"I saw changes coming in my industry and didn't want to be caught off guard. **WIN-NextGen™** gave me the tools, insights, and personalized support I needed to stay ahead. The Career Navigator helped me make strategic moves —now I'm not just reacting to change, I'm ready for it."

— Sid Williams, WIN-NextGen™ Member



## Conclusion: Building a Generation of Purpose-Driven Talent (continued)

WIN-NextGen™ is committed to cultivating a generation of **purpose-driven workers, innovators, and leaders** who are equipped to thrive in a rapidly evolving economy. Our model is grounded in three interconnected strategies that aim to help manufacturers and employers overcome persistent talent challenges:

### A. Understanding Changing Workforce Expectations

Today's workers—especially Gen Z—prioritize flexibility, purpose, and opportunities for growth.<sup>39</sup> WIN-NextGen™ collaborates to co-create with employers to meet these evolving expectations by embedding career exploration, digital readiness, and mentorship into early education and workforce training initiatives. Through the GT3S™ Platform, students engage in self-paced learning and assessments, AI-powered career exploration, and interactive experiences that help them envision future paths aligned with both industry demand and personal interest. WIN-NextGen™ also delivers mentorship through the Career Navigator Program and connects youth with real-world exposure to workplace culture and innovation. These tools and experiences allow employers to begin engaging talent early—creating a pipeline that values voice, vision, and the digital fluency necessary for the future of work.



## Conclusion: Building a Generation of Purpose-Driven Talent (continued)

### B. Applying a “Customer Focus” to Workforce Challenges

Just as companies tailor experiences to meet customer needs, WIN-NextGen™ encourages employers to **design workforce strategies around the lived experiences and expectations of young workers**. This includes improving onboarding, investing in leadership development, and creating feedback loops that elevate a worker’s voice.

To support these efforts, WIN-NextGen™ offers integrated digital tools such as the **Partner Portal**, **GT3S™ platform**, and **Career Navigator program**. These resources allow employers to create **sustainable engagement opportunities**, helping them educate emerging talent about their **brand, culture, and values** from the earliest stages of career exploration. GT3S™ supports real-time credential tracking and learner engagement, while the Career Navigator Program enables students to connect with potential employers through personalized career pathways and virtual touchpoints. By leveraging these tools, companies can nurture lasting connections with the future workforce—starting well before day one on the job.

### C. Taking an Ecosystem Approach to Attract and Upskill Talent

WIN-NextGen™ embraces a holistic, ecosystem-based model that brings together parents, educators, employers, community organizations, and government agencies to build scalable, sustainable talent pipelines for the next generation. This approach is supported by research from the Aspen Institute and Deloitte, which highlight the importance of cross-sector collaboration, data-sharing, and aligned incentives in successful workforce development.<sup>40</sup>

By integrating these best practices, WIN-NextGen™ is not only addressing persistent skills and talent gaps—it is also reframing workforce development as a shared civic responsibility. Our vision is bold, but our strategy is grounded in research, driven by accessibility, and focused on measurable impact.

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