VSBA
Virginia School Boards Association

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Charlottesville, VA 22911

VSBA Excellence in Workforce Readiness Award

The Virginia School Boards Association would like to invite your school division to apply for the annual *Excellence in Workforce Readiness* award. This award seeks to recognize Virginia school divisions that have achieved excellence in Workforce Readiness through an innovative program/project within your school community or in a regional collaboration with emphasis on:

- communication and collaboration with the business community;
- student engagement with the business community; or
- student entrepreneurial activities.

Only one nomination per school division/region will be accepted.

The VSBA has included a regional category for program nominations to reflect the growing number of collaborations between school divisions in workforce readiness. The regional category is for any two or more school divisions currently working with program partners outside the school division in advancing excellence in workforce readiness through innovative programs/projects across school division boundaries. School divisions nominating a program/project for the regional category may also submit an individual nomination for a program within the school division. The individual nomination must be independent and not part of the regional category.

All nominations must be approved by the school board at a school board meeting. Nominations for the regional category must be approved by all participating school boards at a school board meeting.

All entries must be submitted by the deadline of Friday, May 29, 2026. No entries will be accepted after 11:59 p.m. on May 29, 2026.

Please submit applications to this link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2026WorkforceAward.

All questions regarding submissions should be directed to the VSBA Office of Communications at communications@vsba.org or call 434-295-8722.

Please provide a valid e-mail address when completing the nomination form. This is how we will communicate with you about your nomination.

All nominations must be submitted electronically through the online nomination form. Photos and links to videos may be submitted as long as the information is included in the electronic entry packet.

By submitting materials electronically to VSBA, you agree that VSBA may use, reproduce, and republish the materials, including for marketing and promotional purposes, without restriction.

Please attach a signed copy of the second page when completing the nomination form.
Participation in VSBA initiatives and observances is optional. School boards in Virginia have the discretion on whether to participate locally. Any related materials from the Association are shared as suggested ideas for implementation for any board that may choose to do so.

- Name of Program/Initiative: Microsoft Garage

- Program partners (outside of the school division):

  Microsoft Garage
  Northern Virginia Technology Council (NVTC)

Program Description

- What were the processes employed, the strategies used, and the desired outcomes of this program/project for the school division(s)? (500 words or less)

  Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) office of Career and Technical Education partnered with the Northern Virginia Technology Council (NVTC) to create an intermediary model for the Aim High Initiative, designed to connect students with information technology and technology-adjacent business and industry partners. This approach allowed FCPS to build a structured system for sourcing, organizing, and sustaining employer engagement in support of career-connected learning.

  The process centered on identifying “Aim High Champions,” such as Microsoft Garage, that were willing to provide meaningful work-based learning experiences for students. FCPS and its partners worked collaboratively to align school division goals with business needs, ensuring that opportunities were not random or isolated, but intentionally connected to information technology-related career pathways. The strategy included building partnerships that supported both student experiences and staff development, creating a broader ecosystem of workforce readiness.

  Several strategies were employed. FCPS used NVTC as a business intermediary to strengthen outreach and reduce barriers between schools and employers. The initiative emphasized a range of work-based learning opportunities, including workplace tours, guest speakers, industry panels, and career-connected school events. The project expanded beyond student participation by including staff externships and professional learning opportunities for educators, CTE leaders, and student organization advisors. This helped ensure that teachers and school staff gained current industry knowledge that could be brought back into classrooms and career advising. Finally, the initiative leveraged in-kind support, such as equipment donations and hosted events, to increase access to resources and deepen partnership value.

  The desired outcomes for FCPS included increasing student access to work-based learning, strengthening career pathway alignment, and building stronger connections between education and industry. The initiative was also designed to improve student awareness of IT careers, enhance instructional relevance, and create sustainable partnerships that would support both student success and workforce development. For the school division, this project helped create a more coordinated and intentional

approach to preparing students for future careers while also strengthening relationships with Microsoft as a regional employer.

- In what specific way does the program/project help to prepare students to be workforce ready? (500 words or less)

  The Aim High Initiative helps prepare students to be workforce ready by giving them direct exposure to real-world industry environments, career expectations, and professional skill development within information technology-related fields. Rather than relying only on classroom instruction, the program connects students to authentic work-based learning experiences that help them understand how knowledge and technical skills are applied in the workplace.

  Through work-based learning opportunities provided by Microsoft Garage, students build practical, hands-on experience that strengthens both their technical and employability skills. They develop industry-relevant abilities, gain familiarity with workplace tools and expectations, and begin to understand the day-to-day responsibilities associated with IT and related careers. These experiences make learning more meaningful and help students see the connection between school-based coursework and future employment.

  The initiative also supports career exploration, which is a critical part of workforce readiness. Students are introduced to a variety of roles within the technology sector, helping them make more informed decisions about their postsecondary plans and career interests. Exposure to professionals through workplace tours, panel discussions, guest speakers, and career-connected events allows students to hear directly from individuals working in the field, learn about different career paths, and identify the skills and credentials needed for success.

  In addition, the initiative helps ensure that students are learning in Discovery programs supported by educators who are informed about current industry trends. Staff externships and professional development opportunities allow teachers and school leaders to bring relevant workforce knowledge back into the classroom, further strengthening student preparation.

  Overall, the program prepares students to be workforce ready by combining technical skill-building, career exploration, professional networking, and authentic workplace exposure. It helps students leave school better prepared to transition into postsecondary education, training, and employment in high-demand technology fields.

- How was your school board, community, business, industry, program partners, and/or other entities engaged in this program/project? (500 words or less)

Microsoft Garage was a key business and industry partner in supporting FCPS through the Aim High Initiative. Its engagement went well beyond traditional partnership support by providing meaningful opportunities for both students and staff that strengthened career-connected learning in information technology and related fields.

As an Aim High Champion, Microsoft Garage helped create authentic work-based learning opportunities for high school students seeking to build skills and gain real-world experience in technology career pathways. Through its partnership with FCPS, Microsoft Garage supported students' career exploration by exposing them to workplace environments, professional expectations, and the wide range of opportunities available in the technology industry. This engagement helped connect classroom learning to practical application and gave students valuable insight into future career possibilities.

Microsoft Garage also played an important role in supporting FCPS staff and program development. Over a two-year period, Microsoft hosted Work-Based Learning School-Based Staff Externships for the CTE and Work-Based Learning teams. These externships included workplace tours, group discussions, and industry panel conversations that allowed FCPS staff to learn directly from professionals about hiring trends, internship opportunities, workforce needs, and emerging industry practices. By investing in staff learning, Microsoft Garage helped strengthen the school division's ability to provide relevant and informed career preparation for students.

In addition, Microsoft Garage hosted several important FCPS events that supported leadership development and professional learning across the division. These included hosting the CTE department chair meeting for middle and high school educator leaders, and STEAM and computer science in-service professional development. These experiences gave educators and advisors the opportunity to engage directly with industry professionals, hear career-focused insights, and bring that knowledge back to their schools and classrooms.

Microsoft Garage also contributed tangible resources to support student learning. Through an in-kind donation, Microsoft provided a Universal Laser Engraver to Sandburg Middle School's Technology and Engineering program, expanding student access to industry-relevant tools and hands-on experiences. In addition, Microsoft supported the development of STEAM guest speaker in-school experiences that schools could use during career days, career fairs, and STEAM nights to further connect students with career pathways and industry voices.

Overall, Microsoft Garage was deeply engaged as a strategic program partner by supporting student work-based learning, educator professional development, career-connected events, and instructional resources. Its partnership with FCPS demonstrated how one committed industry partner can make a significant impact on workforce readiness, program quality, and school-community connections.

- Explain how the school division met desired outcomes of the program/project. (500 words or less)

  FCPS met the desired outcomes of this program by turning the Aim High partnership with Microsoft Garage into a direct example of Strategic Plan Goal 5: Leading for Tomorrow's Innovation, which states that "every student will graduate ready to thrive in life after high school and with the skills to navigate, adapt, and innovate for a sustainable future." FCPS's Goal 5 measures specifically include student access to and participation in multiple pathways and work-based learning opportunities, development of Portrait of a Graduate competencies and digital literacy, successful transitions to postsecondary opportunities, and preparation for future innovation.

  The division met these outcomes by creating authentic, career-connected experiences that moved beyond awareness to application. Through Microsoft Garage, students were given access to work-based learning opportunities tied to information technology and related career pathways. These experiences helped students apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, strengthen technical and professional skills, and better understand postsecondary and workforce options. That directly supports Goal 5's emphasis on participation in work-based learning and readiness for life after high school.

  Another important outcome was increased staff capacity. Microsoft Garage did not only support students; it also hosted externships, professional learning, and career-focused sessions for FCPS teachers, advisors, and CTE leaders. That professional learning helped educators better understand workforce trends, employer expectations, and relevant industry practices. As a result, school staff were better equipped to connect instruction, advising, and career pathway planning to current labor market realities, which strengthens long-term student outcomes under Goal 5.

- Why does this program/project deserve recognition? (500 words or less)

  This program deserves recognition because it moves beyond a traditional school-business partnership and creates a meaningful, sustained model for workforce readiness. Rather than offering isolated experiences, the partnership with Microsoft Garage provides students with authentic exposure to technology careers through work-based learning, career exploration, and direct interaction with industry professionals. It helps students connect classroom learning to real-world application, which is one of the clearest indicators of a high-impact career readiness program.

  It also deserves recognition because its impact extends beyond students alone. Microsoft Garage has supported FCPS through staff externships, professional development, hosted leadership events, guest speaker opportunities, and in-kind

contributions such as equipment for school programs. This means the initiative strengthens the entire system: students gain skills and career awareness, educators gain current industry knowledge, and schools gain stronger program resources and connections.

Most importantly, this program deserves recognition because it is aligned with the broader mission of preparing students for success after high school. It supports career readiness, strengthens school-community partnerships, and creates opportunities that are both relevant and scalable. It is not only beneficial for FCPS students, but also serves as a model for how districts and industry partners can work together to create lasting impact.