

WorkforceConnect Expands Career Opportunities for Students Through Innovative Partnerships - a Q&A with Debbie Barnum, Founder & CEO of WorkforceConnect and East County Schools Federal Credit Union

ECSFCU: Can you tell us about WorkforceConnect—how did the company get started, and what inspired the mission?

Debbie Barnum: At WorkforceConnect, our mission is to bridge the gap between job seekers and the skills needed to thrive in today’s workforce. We were founded with the goal of empowering individuals from diverse backgrounds, helping them build the confidence and capabilities necessary for fulfilling careers. While our early beginnings were rooted in a commitment to workforce development, our approach has always been holistic—focusing not just on job placement but on sustainable career growth.

We are driven by the belief that meaningful employment changes lives, strengthens communities, and fosters economic prosperity. That’s why we collaborate with businesses, educational institutions, government agencies, and community organizations, bringing them together to develop programs that equip individuals with both technical skills and essential soft skills. Our work goes beyond training; it’s about creating an ecosystem where individuals and businesses can grow together.

ECSFCU: How did WorkforceConnect establish a partnership with Cajon Valley School District and Bostonia Global?

Debbie Barnum: Our partnership with Cajon Valley Union School District and Bostonia Global High School was born out of a shared vision: preparing students for success beyond high school by integrating career exploration and skill development into their education. Through initiatives like the World of Work program, we’ve been able to work alongside educators to help students discover their strengths, explore different career pathways, and develop essential workplace skills.

We also collaborate with other organizations, such as the AGC Apprenticeship & Training Trust, to provide hands-on learning experiences for students. These partnerships ensure that young



people don't just learn about careers in theory—they get to see and experience real-world applications of their skills.

ECSFCU: What drew you to work with this particular school district?

Debbie Barnum: We were drawn to Cajon Valley School District and Bostonia Global because of their commitment to innovative, student-centered learning. Their focus on competency-based education, career readiness, individualized pathways, and equity aligns perfectly with our mission. Bostonia Global, in particular, emphasizes providing students with equitable access to programs that promote both academic achievement and social-emotional well-being.

This district understands that preparing students for the workforce means more than just academic success—it's about equipping them with the skills, mindset, and experiences to thrive in an ever-changing job market. By working together, we can help ensure that students graduate with a strong sense of direction, ready to step into careers that are meaningful and fulfilling.

ECSFCU: Can you describe what the WorkforceConnect (WFC) program looks like at Bostonia Global? What activities or initiatives are involved?

Debbie Barnum: At Bostonia Global, the WorkforceConnect program is all about providing students with hands-on learning experiences that prepare them for real-world careers. We integrate career exploration, skill-building, and mentorship opportunities directly into their education. Students get exposure to various industries, whether through guest speakers, site visits, apprenticeships, or project-based learning.

One of our key initiatives is collaborating with local businesses and trade organizations to give students access to real workplace environments. We also emphasize soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving—skills that employers consistently tell us are just as critical as technical expertise. Through our partnerships, we're helping students see career possibilities they may have never considered before.

ECSFCU: How have students and educators responded to the program so far?

Debbie Barnum: The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Educators appreciate how the program makes learning more relevant and engaging. They see students becoming more motivated when they can connect their education to tangible career opportunities focused on their interests and strengths. Teachers have told us that students are asking more questions, thinking critically about their futures, and showing greater confidence in their abilities.

Students, on their end, are excited to explore careers in a way that feels meaningful. Many have shared that they now have a clearer idea of what they want to do after high school, and they feel



better prepared to take the next step—whether that’s pursuing higher education, trade programs, or jumping straight into the workforce.

ECSFCU: Have you seen any early success stories or moments that stand out?

Debbie Barnum: Absolutely! One of the most rewarding moments was seeing a student who had never considered a career in construction absolutely light up after participating in a hands-on workshop with the AGC Apprenticeship & Training Trust. Before the program, he wasn’t sure what path to take, but after the experience, he was eager to explore an apprenticeship.

We’ve also seen students who struggled in traditional academic settings suddenly find purpose and motivation when introduced to career pathways that align with their strengths. There was one student who always had a knack for fixing things, but never thought of it as a career possibility. After engaging in our program, he started seriously looking into trade schools and apprenticeship programs—and now he has a plan for his future that excites him.

These moments reinforce why we do this work. Seeing students gain confidence, find direction, and take ownership of their future is what makes WorkforceConnect so impactful.

Challenges & Growth

ECSFCU: What challenges have you faced in implementing WorkforceConnect at Bostonia Global?

Debbie Barnum: One of the biggest challenges we’ve faced is shifting mindsets—helping students, parents, and even some educators see career-connected learning as a vital part of K-12 education. Traditionally, schools have focused on college readiness, sometimes at the expense of exposing students to other viable career paths. It’s been a hurdle to overcome that perception by showing that career exploration is just as valuable as academic achievement.

Another challenge has been ensuring that every student has access to meaningful experiences, regardless of their background or circumstances. Not every student has the same support system or exposure to career opportunities outside of school, so we’ve worked hard to level the playing field.

ECSFCU: How have you overcome these obstacles, or what lessons have you learned along the way?

Debbie Barnum: The key has been communication, collaboration, and flexibility. We’ve worked closely with educators to integrate workforce readiness into the curriculum in ways that feels



natural and beneficial. Bringing in industry professionals to speak with students has helped bridge the gap and make careers feel more accessible.

We've also learned that exposure is everything. When students get hands-on experiences—whether through internships, apprenticeships, or site visits—it sparks a sense of curiosity and motivation that can't always be achieved through traditional classroom learning alone.

ECSFCU: Are there any aspects of the program you've had to adjust or rethink since launching?

Debbie Barnum: Yes, we've made a few adjustments based on feedback. Initially, we focused heavily on in-person experiences, but we've since expanded virtual opportunities to connect students with professionals from a broader range of industries. We've also fine-tuned our approach to mentorship, recognizing that consistent, long-term mentorship relationships are often more impactful than one-time career fairs or guest lectures.

Another shift has been emphasizing not just career exposure, but also career preparedness—helping students build tangible skills that they can immediately apply, whether that's resume writing, interview skills, or technical certifications.

Vision for the Future

ECSFCU: What is your vision for WorkforceConnect's impact at Bostonia Global and beyond?

Debbie Barnum: We want to create a culture where career exploration is an integrated, expected, and celebrated part of every student's education. At Bostonia Global, we hope to continue expanding our partnerships, providing more hands-on learning experiences, and ensuring that every student graduates with a clear sense of direction and purpose.

Beyond Bostonia Global, we aim to scale this model to other schools and districts, proving that career-connected learning isn't just a "nice-to-have" but a necessity in education.

ECSFCU: Are there plans to extend this partnership or introduce new elements to the program?

Debbie Barnum: Yes! We're actively exploring ways to deepen our partnerships with local businesses and industries to create even more apprenticeship and internship opportunities. We're also looking at ways to integrate more technology-driven career pathways, recognizing that fields like AI, cybersecurity, and renewable energy are rapidly growing.



Another exciting prospect is bringing parents more into the conversation—helping them understand the variety of career pathways available and how they can support their children's choices.

ECSFCU: How do you see the role of career-connected learning evolving in K-12 education?

Debbie Barnum: Career-connected learning is the future of education. Schools are starting to realize that success isn't just about test scores or college acceptance rates—it's about ensuring students are prepared for whatever path they choose. Whether that's a four-year university, a trade school, or entering the workforce directly, every student should leave high school with a plan and the skills to execute it. We're witnessing more schools adopt a blended approach that combines academics with real-world learning experiences, industry certifications, and early workforce exposure. The goal is to make education more relevant, engaging, and personalized to each student's strengths and interests.

Final Thought

ECSFCU: If you could share one key takeaway or piece of advice for schools looking to implement similar programs, what would it be?

Debbie Barnum: Start with exposure. Many students don't know what they don't know, so giving them a chance to explore different careers early on can be life-changing. Also, partnerships are everything—working with businesses, industry leaders, and community organizations will strengthen the program and provide students with real opportunities.

Most importantly, listen to the students. Their interests, aspirations, and needs should guide the evolution of the program.

ECSFCU: How can the community, local businesses, or other stakeholders get involved or support WorkforceConnect's mission?

Debbie Barnum: There are so many ways to get involved! Businesses can partner with us to offer internships, mentorship, or site visits. Industry professionals can volunteer as mock interviewers, guest speakers or mentors. Community members can help spread the word and advocate for career-connected learning in schools.

Workforce development is a collective effort, and when schools, businesses, and communities come together, we can create incredible opportunities for the next generation. If you're interested in partnering with us, we'd love to hear from you!

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