

THE CENTRE
FOR CHILD RIGHTS AND BUSINESS

A young man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket, is seen from the side, looking up at a large bronze statue of a longhorn. The statue is standing on a dark, textured base. The background shows green trees and a clear blue sky.

Business as
Unusual
in Dodge City

Reflections from a new Youth Development model for workforce development in American manufacturing through youth apprenticeships

Why youth employment matters for American businesses

The challenge is real, but the opportunity is bigger.

Across the United States, businesses are struggling to fill skilled trades and technical roles. At the same time, many young people are looking for opportunities to gain the skills, experience, and qualifications they need to enter the workforce, but lack access to safe, legal, and meaningful work.

The challenge is real, but the opportunity is bigger. Businesses need solutions, and The Centre's Youth Development Program (YDP)* delivers.

Developed by The Centre for Child Rights and Business in partnership with the Rural Education and Workforce Alliance (REWA), the program works with local schools, employers, and training providers in Dodge City, Kansas, to create safe, legal, and meaningful employment opportunities for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Through a two-year apprenticeship program approved by the Kansas State Council, young people combine education, paid work experience, and technical training while businesses build a pipeline of future skilled workers.

By bringing together businesses, schools and community organisations, the program helps address two connected challenges: giving young people a strong start in the workforce while helping employers develop the skilled talent they need.

The long-term goal is straightforward: to make investing in young people part of how businesses build a stronger workforce for the future.

* The Youth Development Program is referred to as the Access to Decent Work for Youth (AD-Y) program outside the United States.



Photo: A young worker enrolled in the Youth Development Program at Curtis Machine.

It takes a community to build a workforce

Creating pathways into decent work starts with changing mindsets.

As Project Coordinator at REWA, Kyla works closely with schools, families and businesses to identify young people who can benefit from apprenticeship opportunities. She shares her reflections on the Youth Development Program (YDP) and its role in creating pathways into decent work for young people.

More than an apprenticeship

For many students, particularly newcomers and first-generation high school graduates, further education or technical training is often not on the radar.

The YDP changes that by combining income, education and industry-recognised skills.

Supporting young people and their families

REWA also delivers rights-at-work sessions to students and parents using bilingual legal information materials developed by The Centre.

These sessions help young people and their families understand legal working conditions, education pathways, and employment opportunities available within their community.

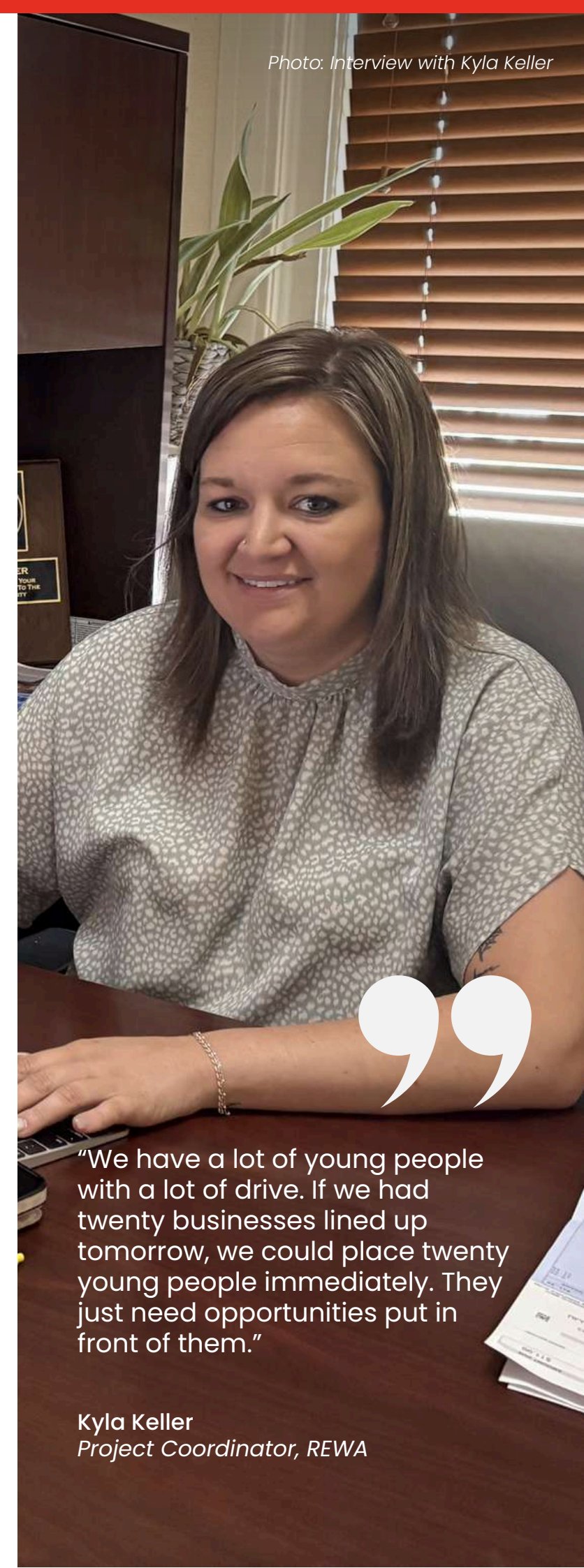
For families who depend on adolescent income, the program offers an alternative to informal or precarious work by combining earnings with education and certification.

The challenge is not finding young people. It's changing mindsets.

According to Kyla, the greatest challenge has not been recruiting participants. It has been helping businesses see the value that 16 and 17-year-olds can bring when they are given the right support, mentoring and opportunities.

Demand from young people already exceeds the number of placements available.

Photo: Interview with Kyla Keller



"We have a lot of young people with a lot of drive. If we had twenty businesses lined up tomorrow, we could place twenty young people immediately. They just need opportunities put in front of them."

Kyla Keller
Project Coordinator, REWA

A city preparing for its future workforce

In southwest Kansas, employers across industries are grappling with a common challenge: where will the next generation of skilled workers come from?

As Vice President of Workforce Development at Dodge City Community College, Clayton Tatro is developing the industrial maintenance program that apprentices in the Youth Development Program (YDP) will begin in Fall 2026.

Beyond a pay cheque

According to Clayton, there is an important difference between a job and a career.

A job pays the bills. A career provides skills, progression and long-term opportunities.

The YDP model was designed to create exactly that: pathways that combine education, technical training, and paid work experience to help young people build sustainable futures in industries facing growing labour shortages.

Clayton recalls one 17-year-old student who attended college classes in the morning, high school during the day and then worked evening shifts at a fast-food restaurant until midnight or later.

Before dawn the next morning, he was

back up, helping his younger siblings get ready for school before starting the cycle again.

Stories like this are not unusual.

For Clayton, they reinforce the need for employment models that support education, rather than compete with it.

The YDP offers an alternative by integrating paid learning, study time, and workplace experience into the working day.

Clayton believes the program's success will encourage more businesses to participate. As employers see apprentices gaining skills, confidence and becoming valuable employees, he expects momentum to build.

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“We’re trying to get these young people a career, not necessarily a job. This community needs the next generation of workers.”

Clayton Tatro
Vice President of Workforce Development,
Dodge City Community College



Photo: Entrance of the Student Union at Dodge City Community College.

How one manufacturer took a different approach to youth employment

Building the next generation's workforce in action.

Curtis Machine is the first business in Dodge City to join the Youth Development Program (YDP).

For President Scott Beatty, the YDP is more than a good idea — it is an investment in the future of Curtis Machine's workforce. The goal is simple: to develop confident, skilled young people who can become future leaders within the company.

The program combines education, hands-on training, and supported study time within a structured eight-hour day, allowing apprentices to gain skills while contributing to the business.

Apprentices split their time between high school and/or college classes and practical experience on the production floor, rotating through different functions and building technical expertise.

Every hour is paid — including classroom learning and study time — because learning is part of the job.

“We pay for the apprenticeship, the college time, and the study time because investing in young people is investing in our future workforce. If we want the next generation workforce, we need to help build it.”

Scott Beatty
President, Curtis Machine

The image shows the exterior of a building with a corrugated metal facade. Large, dark blue, three-dimensional letters spell out "CURTIS" on the top line and "MACHINE COMPANY" on the line below. The sky is visible in the background.

The Youth Development Program at Curtis Machine

State-approved apprenticeship

The YDP is registered with the Kansas State Council and follows all legal requirements for 16–17-year-olds.

Safe and legal work

Youths are placed in non-hazardous roles appropriate for their age and skill level.

Education comes first

Apprentices continue their education while gaining valuable workforce experience.

Pathways for the future

Graduates leave with certificates, experience, and a clear path to long-term employment.

All hours paid for

Apprentices are paid not only for their work, but also for their education and study time.

A career that started with a first opportunity

Paid to learn and build a career with the Youth Development Program (YDP).

Recruited through the YDP, Henry* represents the next generation of skilled industrial workers, combining education with hands-on experience at Curtis Machine.

At 17, Henry was looking for an opportunity to begin a career in manufacturing, but found that few employers were willing to hire young people under 18.

When Henry met Curtis Machine at a high school career day, the company stood out as one of the few actively creating opportunities for young people under 18.

Through the YDP, he joined Curtis Machine's industrial maintenance apprenticeship, combining education with hands-on workplace experience in a supportive environment that has helped him develop both skills and confidence.

In the future, he hopes to pass on that experience by helping others learn and grow in the same way.

** A pseudonym is used to protect the individual's identity.*

Photo: Henry at work at Curtis Manufacturing.



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“This was the only place that really offered me an opportunity. Hopefully, I'll be helping others learn what I've learned.”

Henry
Apprentice, Curtis Machine

Where the workforce pipeline begins

For Dodge City High School, workforce development starts long before students enter the workplace.

As a Pathway Coordinator at Dodge City High School, Maria Kane helps connect students with opportunities through the Youth Development Program (YDP). She reflects on the importance of ensuring that education and employment work hand in hand in preparing the next generation of the workforce.

Supporting students facing additional barriers

With more than 2,200 students attending the city's only high school, Maria and her team help students understand the opportunities available to them after graduation — whether that means college, technical education, or entering the workforce through apprenticeships.

One of the groups Maria works closely with is young people arriving from Cuba as refugees.

While these students have the legal right to work in the United States, many are unable to obtain formal recognition of their previous education due to missing academic transcripts.

As a result, traditional routes to graduation and further education can become significantly more complicated, while economic pressures often mean young people feel an immediate need to contribute financially to their households.

Before the YDP was first introduced, Maria had heard stories from neighbouring communities of young people working overnight shifts before returning to school the next morning.

Young people cannot be expected to

succeed academically if they are exhausted, missing classes, or forced to choose between school and supporting their families. The YDP model was designed to remove that choice by providing an alternative pathway that allows young people to continue learning while gaining work experience, income and recognised skills.

Creating pathways beyond graduation

The impact of the program is already extending beyond manufacturing apprenticeships.

This autumn, Dodge City High School will launch five registered apprenticeships for senior students interested in becoming teachers.

Participants will complete a one-year placement in local elementary schools as classroom assistants, earning USD 14 per hour and creating an early pathway into the education profession.

For Maria, these programs represent something larger than individual placements. They demonstrate what becomes possible when schools, employers, and communities work together to invest in the next generation workforce.



“The school district is the start of the pipeline of young people entering the workforce. Young people shouldn't have to choose between education and supporting their families.”

Maria Kane
Pathway Coordinator,
Dodge City High School



Photo: Students at Dodge City High School.

Our partners

The Centre's Youth Development Program (YDP) in the United States is funded by Cargill, with implementation led by local partners, including REWA and the Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board.



How you can get involved

The YDP is built on the experiences of the young people, businesses, educators and community partners helping shape the next generation workforce in Dodge City, Kansas. This program is also available in Virginia through a partnership with the Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board to help businesses provide more opportunities for youth.

- Become an employer partner by joining the program and hiring apprentices in Dodge City or the Shenandoah Valley.
- Explore replication opportunities by discussing how a similar program could be established in your city, county, or region.
- Support the program through sponsorship or investment to help expand opportunities for young people.



Learn more about The Centre's
work in the United States

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Date of publication: July 15, 2026