

CASE STUDY:

GOING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The Power of Junior Achievement's Experiential Learning Centers

How immersive, career-connected experiences equip students with the mindsets, skillsets, and behaviors to access opportunity-filled futures.



Junior
Achievement®

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THE BIG PICTURE

Across the country, school districts are being asked to prepare students for a future that is changing faster than ever before. Employers are seeking graduates with durable skills, career awareness, financial capability, and the confidence to navigate an increasingly complex economy. At the same time, educators face declining student engagement, limited opportunities for career-connected learning, and increasing pressure to demonstrate meaningful postsecondary outcomes.

In fact, 2026 research from Junior Achievement and Basenit Insights found:

91% of education leaders agree

“there is a disconnect between what is taught in primary and secondary schools and what it takes for students to succeed economically in the future.”

Traditional classroom instruction remains essential, but it cannot meet these challenges alone. **Junior Achievement’s Experiential Learning Centers (ELCs) were designed to bridge this gap by expanding access to high-impact, real-world learning experiences.** Through immersive, hands-on experiences, ELCs connect academic concepts to authentic decision-making, helping students understand not only what they are learning, but why it matters.

Junior Achievement offers a portfolio of implementation models designed to meet the unique needs of communities and expand access to these experiences at scale. Together, these models create a comprehensive ecosystem of learning that grows with students throughout their educational journey by preparing them for success in school, work, and life.

THE CHALLENGE

WHEN THE FUTURE IS UNCLEAR, PREPARATION MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

The path from classroom to career is becoming less linear and more difficult to navigate for students today. They are entering a rapidly changing economy shaped by technological advancement like AI, evolving workforce expectations, and shifting definitions of career success. Employers increasingly seek candidates who can communicate, think critically, solve problems, adapt to change, and make informed decisions. However, students cannot develop these skills simply by hearing about them. **They need opportunities to practice and gain experience.**

1.



THE CHALLENGE

DISTRICT LEADERS ARE FACING SEVERAL INTERCONNECTED CHALLENGES:

1 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN.

Students are more likely to engage when learning feels relevant to their lives and futures. Connecting academic concepts to authentic experiences can help answer the question students often ask: "When will I ever use this?"

2 DISTRICTS NEED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THAT CAN SCALE.

Individual career days, guest speakers, and isolated enrichment activities can provide valuable exposure, but districts need solutions that can reach students consistently across schools and grade levels.

3 EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE SYSTEMS NEED STRONGER CONNECTIONS.

Preparing students for economic mobility requires collaboration across sectors. Businesses and community organizations are vital in helping students understand the opportunities available and the skills required to pursue them.

The need is clear. Students need more opportunities and experiences to connect what they learn today with what they can do tomorrow. Students who participate in career-connected learning are 16 times more likely to feel prepared for life after graduation compared to peers who do not have those experiences.

THE ELC SOLUTION

A CONTINUUM OF IMPACT, NOT EPISODIC EXPERIENCES

Junior Achievement's Experiential Learning Centers (ELCs) offer districts a fundamentally different approach to experiential learning. One that moves beyond isolated activities to create a connected, immersive learning experience that develops with students over time. Inside an ELC, students move beyond traditional instruction and into real-world environments where they make decisions, solve problems, collaborate, and put learning into action. The ELC ecosystem connects experiences across a student's educational journey, allowing students to build on what they have learned and develop increasingly sophisticated skills

as they progress from elementary through high school. This approach matters because engagement is closely connected to how students experience and apply what they are learning. ELCs are intentionally designed to make learning relevant and meaningful, to help students see themselves in future careers, recognize the value of their education, and build confidence to imagine and pursue new possibilities.

The result is more than a memorable experience. It is learning that students can carry forward, building the confidence, capability, competence, and connections they need to navigate what comes next.

JA BIZTOWN | JA FINANCE PARK | JA DREAM ACCELERATOR

Each experience serves a distinct purpose while driving measurable outcomes through real-world application.



DISCOVER

For 5th - 6th grade students, **JA BizTown®** brings learning to life by placing them inside a fully immersive, simulated community where they experience how people, businesses, and communities work together. After preparing in the classroom, students step into roles such as CEOs, mayors, employees, and citizens, taking on jobs, operating businesses, earning paychecks, managing money, and making decisions that affect the community around them. As students navigate their roles, they collaborate with peers, solve problems, communicate, and practice the responsibility that comes with employment, entrepreneurship, and citizenship. Supported by educators, volunteers, and business professionals, students gain a firsthand understanding of how their skills and decisions can influence their success.



JA BizTown helps students build confidence, discover new possibilities, and begin to see how the choices they make today can shape their futures.



APPLY

Today's students will make some of the biggest financial decisions in their lives within just a few years of leaving school. Each decision reinforces the connection between education, career choices, income, and financial well-being; helping students see how the choices they make today can influence the opportunities available to them tomorrow.

JA Finance Park® gives 7th- 8th grade & high school students an environment to practice those decisions before the stakes become real.

Students step into an adult role with a career, income, and family scenario, then navigate the everyday decisions that come with managing a household and building a life. From choosing housing and transportation to managing insurance, savings, and monthly expenses, students must make tradeoffs and prioritize what matters most.



APPLY

With support from educators, volunteers, and business professionals, students apply financial concepts in a realistic simulation where they can experience the consequences of their decisions firsthand. The result is a learning experience that **makes financial capability more than a lesson; it becomes a skill students can use to navigate their futures with greater confidence, capability, and purpose.**



EXPLORE + PREPARE

As students grow, **JA Dream Accelerator®** builds on the foundation established through earlier ELC experiences by helping young people understand who they are, expand their sense of what is possible, and begin shaping a future they can see themselves pursuing. The interactive career exploration experience helps high school students uncover their strengths, explore education and career pathways, and connect their interests and aspirations to real-world possibilities. The experience moves students through a progression of increasingly meaningful questions: **Do I belong? Who am I? Who could I become? What does it take? What can I do? Who do I want to become?**



Students examine the realities behind different pathways including the education, skills, experiences, and choices required to pursue them, and consider how their decisions today can shape their future opportunities. Through guided exploration and conversations with volunteers and industry professionals, students build the self-awareness, agency, and mindset to move from imagining a future to taking purposeful steps toward it. They identify opportunities, solve problems, use resources, make decisions, take action, and begin developing a plan for what comes next.

More than helping young people dream about their future, JA Dream Accelerator helps them develop a future identity they can believe in, understand what it takes to achieve it, and see themselves as capable of taking action toward it.

Many career-connected learning opportunities provide valuable exposure. **An ELC is designed to provide something broader: a scalable ecosystem that districts can use to build a sustained continuum of experiential learning.** By combining classroom learning with immersive, hands-on experiences, ELCs create opportunities for students to practice real-world decision-making, develop durable skills, and see how the choices they make today can influence the opportunities available to them tomorrow.

“While the BizTown visit itself was exciting, there were also several important learning experiences involved. I especially appreciated that students had the opportunity to write a resume and participate in job interviews with parent volunteers. Those are valuable life skills that many students do not get to practice at this age. Additionally, participating in both a primary and general election for mayor gave students a hands-on understanding of the democratic process. - *Educator, JA North*”

For many students, the path to economic opportunity begins long before they choose a career, it begins when they can see themselves having a future worth working toward. Junior Achievement's ELCs create a connected learning journey that helps students progressively discover what is possible, understand what it takes, and see themselves as capable of shaping their future. This progression allows districts to move beyond one-time exposure and create a continuum of career-connected learning that grows with students.

Learning Through Real-World Experience

ELCs put students at the center of the experience. Rather than simply learning about careers, financial literacy, or workplace skills, students make decisions, solve problems, collaborate, communicate, and experience the results of their choices. This hands-on approach makes learning relevant while giving students a safe environment to practice the skills they will need beyond the classroom.

Connecting Learning to What's Next

ELCs help students see the connection between what they learn, what they can do, and where they can go. Students encounter

careers and industries, apply academic concepts to real-world situations, and begin to understand how education, skills, and personal choices can shape future opportunities.

Delivering Value Where Districts Need It Most

An ELC is not simply an individual student experience; it can become part of a district's broader strategy for career-connected learning. Districts can engage multiple schools and grade levels through a consistent model while leveraging educators, business partners, volunteers, and community resources. This creates a scalable approach that can reach more students while strengthening connections between education, workforce, and community.

Powered by Partnership

Meaningful career-connected learning happens when students can learn from more than a textbook. ELCs bring together educators, business professionals, volunteers, and community partners to create authentic learning experiences. These connections give students opportunities to interact with adults beyond their immediate school environment, learn about different careers and industries, and expand their understanding of what may be possible.

TURNING EXPERIENCES INTO OUTCOMES

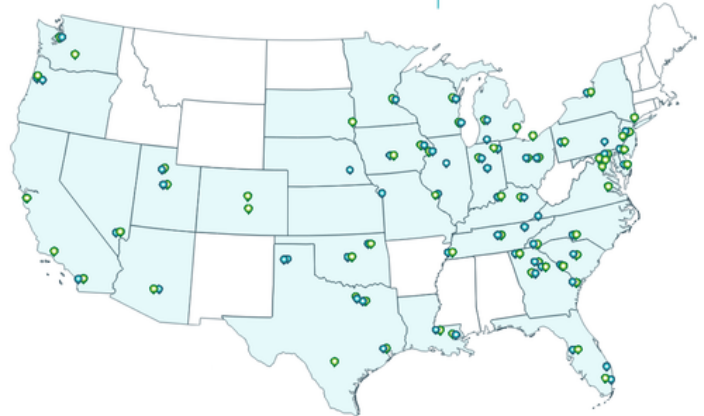
Participation is only the beginning. **The purpose of an ELC is what students take away from the experience and how those outcomes build over time.** The value of experiential learning is ultimately measured by what students take with them after the experience. Across ELC experiences, students have opportunities to build skills and mindsets that extend beyond a single day or grade level.

BY THE NUMBERS - ELC SOLUTION SET

- 90%** Of students report connecting the relevance of education to future career opportunities because of a JA ELC experience.
- 93%** Of teachers observe a sustained higher level of engagement by their students in the classroom following a JA ELC experience.
- 90%** Of teachers report that their students are trying to do better in school following a JA ELC experience.

Junior Achievement of Georgia, Evaluation Data of JA BizTown/JA Finance Park (2015)

NATIONAL IMPACT AT A GLANCE



WHY IT MATTERS —

Students need opportunities to understand how knowledge translates into action, how skills translate into careers, and how the decisions they make today can influence the opportunities available to them tomorrow. Junior Achievement's Experiential Learning Centers provide districts a way to build that continuum, connecting elementary exploration with middle-grade application and high-school preparation through immersive experiences that bring education, workforce, and community together.

When students experience that strategy year after year, the impact can extend far beyond the ELC itself, but into classrooms, careers, communities, and ultimately, economic mobility.

The JA Finance Park experience provided a much-needed wake-up call to my seniors before they left high school. The simulation fosters an invaluable learning experience for any age group, and I feel confident that my students are now ready for life after high school.

– High School Personal Finance Teacher, JA of South Dakota

BY THE NUMBERS - JA FINANCE PARK®

- 94%** Of students feel more hopeful about their future.
- 95%** Of students have a stronger confidence in their ability to succeed in the workplace.
- 95%** Of students had an increased motivation to pursue their educational and career interests.

LOOKING AHEAD

As districts rethink how they prepare students for postsecondary education, careers, and life, the need for scalable, experiential learning will only continue to grow. But the opportunity extends beyond career readiness. Experiential learning can also play a role in helping students build the skills, mindsets, relationships, and access to opportunities that contribute to economic mobility. Research examining the relative impact of life experiences on economic mobility points to experiences such as completing postsecondary education, earning a degree in a high-paying field, obtaining a first job with opportunities for advancement, receiving job or skills training, building relationships through mentorship, and gaining access to opportunities and networks.

These experiences don't happen in isolation; they are supported by foundational building blocks including educational attainment, transferable skills and competencies, access to networks that expand opportunities, and student engagement with a growth mindset.

ELCs create opportunities to strengthen these building blocks through authentic, relevant, and experiential learning.

Students engage with educators, volunteers, business professionals, and peers; practice transferable skills through real-world decision-making; connect education to careers and future opportunities; and develop the confidence and agency to take purposeful action. Career-connected learning starts long before a student chooses a career. It starts by helping students see a future they can believe in and giving them opportunities to begin building toward it.



KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

What would it look like if every student had multiple opportunities throughout their education to build transferable skills, connect with mentors and networks, explore future pathways, practice real-world decision-making, and develop the confidence and agency to shape their future?

Junior Achievement's Experiential Learning Centers can help districts build that pathway, creating a continuum of experiences that connects education to opportunity and opportunity to economic mobility.

Learn how to bring an Experiential Learning Center (ELC) to your district at jausa.ja.org

A CASE OF SUCCESS

Junior Achievement of Central Iowa:
25 Years of Bringing Learning to Life



Junior Achievement of Central Iowa has built a community-rooted model of experiential learning through their ELCs.

For five years, JA Finance Park® has connected thousands of Central Iowa students to real-world financial and career experiences. During that time, the experience has served 22,982 students across 25 school districts and 84 schools, generating nearly 486,000 student contact hours and engaging more than 3,700 community volunteers.

That reach is part of a larger 25-year legacy of experiential learning in Central Iowa. What began with JA BizTown® has grown into a connected continuum of experiences that helps students see how what they learn in the classroom applies to their lives, careers and futures, with 7 of its 14 original storefront sponsors still supporting the experience today.

Over time, with the organization expanding its ELC model to include JA Finance Park®, they are creating more opportunities for students to explore careers, practice financial decision-making and engage with local businesses and professionals.

The impact is significant. In 2026 alone, more than 9,700 students participated in JA BizTown® and nearly 5,900 participated in JA Finance Park. The value of the ELC experience goes beyond participation. In JA Finance Park®, **91% of students** said what they learned would be important in the future, **90%** said it would help them be successful in their lives, and **95%** said they felt confident they could accomplish their financial goals after completing the experience.

PROOF OF SCALE

JA Finance Park® | Five Years of Impact

22,982

STUDENTS SERVED

3,720

VOLUNTEERS ENGAGED

84

SCHOOLS IMPACTED

25

SCHOOL DISTRICTS

FROM JA BIZTOWN TO THEIR OWN BUSINESS

After visiting JA BizTown®, a group of students took their learning home and turned it into a landscaping business with their siblings. They divided leadership roles, set prices, decided how to split profits and worked together to bring their business to life.

What started as a hands-on experience at the ELC became an opportunity to put their entrepreneurial skills into action, demonstrating how real-world learning can spark confidence, creativity and initiative long after students leave the classroom.

JA of Central Iowa's success demonstrates that an ELC is more than a physical space. It is a community-powered education solution. Businesses and community organizations contribute through sponsorships, volunteers, expertise and ongoing collaboration. Their involvement helps keep experiences relevant to the industries, careers and economic realities students see in their own communities. A transformational leadership gift from Wells Fargo helped launch JA Finance Park®, while partners such as MidAmerican Energy Foundation helped create career-connected experiences within the center.

Educators and school districts are equally important to the model. Central Iowa has strengthened district relationships by meeting schools where they are, understanding their priorities, and building experiences that fit within their K-12 structures.

The result is a continuum in which students can encounter JA in the classroom, apply their learning through ELC experiences, and continue building skills through high school opportunities.

A MODEL THAT EVOLVES

SUCCESSFUL ELCs ARE DESIGNED TO EVOLVE.

The clearest lesson from Central Iowa is that successful ELCs are designed to evolve. JA Finance Park itself has continued to change since welcoming its first students in 2021. After launching Finance Park 2.0, Central Iowa is now preparing to introduce Finance Park® 3.0, bringing new ways for students to connect money, careers and their futures while maintaining the real-world decision-making at the heart of the experience. The space stays, the experience evolves.

That mindset has allowed Central Iowa to build on a 25-year legacy while continuing to respond to changing student, educator, district, and workforce needs. The Central Iowa experience demonstrates what an ELC can become when it is rooted in community, driven by partnership and designed as part of a larger educational continuum: a place where learning comes to life and where students can begin to envision what's next.



When JA of Central Iowa was asked about the key to success for other areas considering an ELC...

"Building strong relationships, staying flexible, investing early in volunteer a strategy, and keeping your simulation deeply connected to your local community. Continuous quality improvement is huge; your ELC should evolve every year to stay relevant, equitable, and impactful." - Rachel Haaland, Director of ELCs, JA of Central Iowa