

Students at This High School Do Internships. It's a Game Changer



By [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) — September 30, 2024 ⌚ 9 min read



Agnieszka Crownover explains how a surgical robot works to intern Lutrell Kirk, an 18-year-old high school senior, at Northwest Health in Valparaiso, Ind., on June 4, 2024. Lutrell and other seniors are part of a program to give them hands-on experiences before graduation.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Chesterton, Ind. -

Disengaged students. Sky-high absenteeism. A disconnect between the typical high school's academic curriculum and post-graduation life.

These and related complaints about the American high school experience have been gathering steam for some time; the pandemic exacerbated them. State-level policymakers have taken note, and many are now trying to figure out how to give high school students access to a more relevant and engaging experience that prepares them for a future—whether it involves college or doesn't.

One of those states, Indiana, has begun to reimagine high school graduation requirements—placing a greater emphasis on experiential, hands-on learning. But before the murmurings of change, Indiana's Chesterton High School had already begun moving in this direction.

The school, located in Porter County, Ind., serves approximately 2,000 students from three towns that make up what's known as the Duneland area. In 2019, just before the pandemic struck, the district's then-new superintendent, Chip Pettit, challenged the high school to enroll 50 percent of its seniors in an experiential learning opportunity outside of the school building.

Adding an elective senior internship—lasting a semester or the entire school year, depending on student preference and schedule availability—to its preexisting traditional career and technical education and teacher cadet programs made the goal achievable.

After a slow start, the school's internship program has grown exponentially. In 2019-20, just five students completed internships, mainly due to the logistical challenges the pandemic presented. This past year, it grew to over 180 participating seniors, with more than 200 community organizations agreeing to accept interns.

Just a day before Chesterton seniors graduated from high school in June, Education Week caught up with five seniors to learn about their internship experiences, what they learned, and how the glimpse into the work world may shape their futures.

Prepping animals for surgery

| Ark of the Dunes Animal Hospital



Intern Alex Reed, an 18-year-old high school senior, assists Dana Miller in veterinary care at the Ark of the Dunes Animal Hospital in Chesterton, Ind., June 4, 2024.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

It's a typical busy Wednesday morning at the Ark of the Dunes Animal Hospital in Chesterton, Ind. Two leashed dogs bark loudly at another four-footed patient in the waiting room. But mere feet away, in the pre-op exam room, a sense of calm prevails.

Wearing scrubs, Alex Reed, an intern and senior at Chesterton High School, hovers over the patient before her, one hand resting gently on the dog's belly. She injects the saline solution that will sedate the dog during a spay operation, as another staff member looks on. Once the dog goes limp on the exam table, she shaves the site where the incision will be made and gently clips each of the dog's nails before hooking up the animal to a heart monitor.

Now the canine is ready to undergo its operation, thanks to Alex's efficient work.

Acting with a calm competence that belies her age, Alex begins to sound a bit more her age when asked about how she's enjoying the internship experience. "I love being here," she gushed. "I didn't think it would be so exciting."

Alex's family owns four cats and a chameleon, but it wasn't until the teen began spending time at the animal hospital as an intern—three days a week starting in September 2023—that she developed an appreciation for the various roles of staff members at the animal hospital. Prior to her internship, Alex considered studying herpetology (the branch of zoology related to amphibians and reptiles) in college. Now, she's leaning toward veterinary medicine.

She'll have plenty of time—and more hands-on experience—before solidifying her professional plans. The staff at the animal hospital asked Alex to work through the summer there as a paid full-time employee before heading to college in the fall, allowing her to spend even more time onsite than during her elective internship.

Marketing the Indiana coast lifestyle brand

Retail hub for The IN Coast



Interns Lexi Wolf, 18, and Megan Wilcox, 17, working at The IN Coast store in Chesterton, Ind., June 4, 2024. The two high school seniors have greeted shoppers, contributed to marketing effort, and designed new merchandise.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

In the heart of downtown Chesterton sits a tiny storefront, barely bigger than a garage. But some big brainstorming happens in that small space—the retail hub for The IN Coast, a lifestyle brand celebrating the northwest Indiana lake town. And during the 2023-24 school year, much of it came from Megan Wilcox and Lexi Wolf, Chesterton High School seniors who interned for the business.

Megan and Lexi, interested in marketing and fashion and inspired by the positive experience of a former Chesterton High School intern at The IN Coast, approached owner Jenny Soffin as soon as they learned that she would again be accepting marketing interns from the school. Soffin rewarded their assertiveness with a spot as interns for the school year.

What started as an internship scheduled for 10 to 15 hours per week during their senior year became an all-consuming experience in which no task was too big or too small. Megan and Lexi have done everything from tagging incoming merchandise and welcoming customers to the store to creating a new design for the brand's shorts/sweatshirt set and participating in marketing brainstorm sessions with the leadership team.

Lexi said that she and Megan initially assumed this would be limited to school hours. The reality has proved far different: They don't leave work at the shop when they lock the door for the day.

"Even on the weekends, we're texting Jen ideas. It's become a part of our lives," Megan said.

The interns marveled at the process of seeing their creative ideas come to fruition, from crafting a design to tagging the final product—a T-shirt with the unique pattern screen-printed onto it.

Lexi and Megan are headed to college in the fall, where both planned to take marketing courses. They'll have an advantage over many of their classmates.

"I feel like nothing compares to the impact of hands-on learning," Megan said. "No matter how many classes we would have taken, nothing compares to being in the business and seeing how it works every day."

A student witnesses the inner workings of a hospital up close

 Northwest Health



Lutrell Kirk's internship introduced him to the complex workings of the hospital—from security to surgeries. The 18-year-old high school senior watches as Agnieszka Crownover shows him how a surgical robot works at Northwest Health in Valparaiso, Ind., on June 4, 2024

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Lutrell Kirk says he got lost all the time when he started his internship at Northwest Health, a local hospital in Valparaiso, Ind. It's no wonder, as he was dispatched to 10 to 15 departments throughout the experience. "Now, I know the hospital like the back of my hand," he said.

He also learned several invaluable lessons about working in the hospital setting—lessons not easily taught in a high school classroom.

Observing employees in a dozen or so settings, Lutrell realized two things: Hospitals offer many types of employment opportunities, and every one matters. "From security to surgeons, they all have to do their part to make the hospital run smoothly," said Lutrell, whose tasks ranged from transporting patients through the hospital to delivering bloodwork to laboratories.

During his internship, Lutrell witnessed firsthand how some of the most prestigious medical professions also come with the greatest responsibility. He described standing in an operating

room, impressed by how much respect the staff members showed for the surgeon, and, in turn, the air of authority the surgeon displayed.

“Everyone’s eyes went straight to him when he walked into the operating room. The nurses put on his smock. And then he just got to work,” said Lutrell. “I was like, ‘I want to be like him when I grow up.’ But there’s a lot of pressure on that guy.”

An experience later in his internship drove that lesson home. Lutrell was with a security department staff member when an emergency call came through. An incoming patient had been shot, and they needed to head to the front doors of the emergency department to await his arrival. Police and emergency department personnel crowded the area, and Lutrell watched as the bleeding patient was whisked into an operating room.

“It got real, fast. In just 30 minutes, everything happened and the staff had to be prepared,” said Lutrell, who described the coordinated efforts as a beautiful thing to witness. “This is a real job. People’s lives are on the line.”

As Lutrell pursues studies in biochemistry at Indiana’s Valparaiso University over the next four years, he’ll have time to reflect on his dynamic internship experience and consider how it might shape his future. “There are so many pathways in the hospital,” he said.

An intern-mentor relationship drives the success of a real estate internship

 **McColly Real Estate**



Paul Boyter, left, shows Alex Hurlbert, an intern and 18-year-old high school senior, lot maps in the offices of McColly Real Estate in Chesterton, Ind., June 4, 2024. Alex came away with a new appreciation for the relational aspects of the real estate field.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Ever since he was a young kid, Alex Hurlbert loved driving through neighborhoods and admiring houses with unique architecture and attractive landscaping. So he jumped at the chance to intern at a residential real estate company.

Unsure of what to expect, Alex enjoyed a front-row view of the multi-tiered process that starts with a vacant lot, ends with the sale of a new house on that formerly empty lot, and requires several steps along the way to make it happen. The relationship between Alex and his internship supervisor, Paul Boyter, a managing broker at McColly Real Estate, proved key to the success of the experience.

Alex demonstrated a genuine eagerness to learn and, in turn, Boyter openly shared what he knew. Alex learned the ins and outs of the various online systems associated with the industry and tagged along with Boyter on appointments—whether to the home of a prospective client or to an open house for a home on the market.

“We would go to people’s homes, hear their stories. Alex was right there with me. It’s real-life stuff,” Boyter said. “I didn’t change a thing. I did what I do every day and just incorporated Alex into it.”

Eventually Boyter began entrusting Alex with certain responsibilities in his absence, like researching and providing estimates for the cost of an upcoming home listing and posting new listings online.

The internship taught Alex more than how residential real estate operates. He also picked up on how powerful networking is in the industry to developing a client list and a reputation for high-quality service. “I’m proud that I made all these connections,” Alex said. “Paul’s going to be somebody I talk to in my future, definitely.”

In turn, Paul taught Boyter a valuable lesson, too.

“When I see kids like this, it gives me hope for the future that we’re going to be OK,” the real estate agent said. “That’s what I’ve learned from Alex.”

Designing construction site plans

| Duneland Group, Inc.



Charlie Ray helps Abby Ailes, an intern and 17-year-old high school senior, in the offices of Duneland Group engineering firm in Chesterton, Ind., on June 4, 2024.

— Eric Davis for Education Week

Nine months into her internship at Duneland Group, Inc., an engineering and surveying firm a few miles from her high school campus, Abby Ailes reflects on her first few days there.

“I sat at my computer and all I saw were a million lines on a computer. I had no idea what they meant. I freaked out at first,” Abby said.

Then she gave herself a pep talk. “I was like, I’m here for a year, let’s put my mind to it.”

Eventually, those lines on the computer screen started making sense, as did the industry jargon that engineers in the office used. “You hear talking, you just kind of pick up on it,” she said.

It helped that Abby spent two to three days in the office for the entire school year—and that she resolved early in her experience to persevere in spite of her lack of experience. Prior to her internship, Abby’s only exposure to the industry was an introductory engineering class in her junior year. “We worked on making blocks in class, and cubes. Here, we make real things,” she

said of the company, which provides land development and municipal and civil engineering services.

Since the early days of her internship, Abby has learned that those “lines” on her computer screen represent elements of construction site plans. She’s even been tasked with contributing to and manipulating them.

“I put the house on the lot with the correct building codes and dimensions. To be able to put a house in a subdivision like that, it blows my mind,” said Abby.

It must have impressed her employer, too. The firm asked her to stay on past her internship as a full-time employee until she departed for college in the fall. She’s leaning toward studying engineering, primarily because of her internship experience.



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