Executive Brief: Unlocking Opportunities through Youth Apprenticeships in Utah

May 2025

THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
UTAH EDUCATION POLICY CENTER
uepc.utah.edu

Prepared for
Talent Ready Utah, May 2025

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What You'll Find in this Executive Brief:

- **Purpose and Context** – A brief overview of the purpose and broader context in which the study is situated
- **Study Design** – An overview of the study's data sources, methods, and research questions
- **Key Findings** – A concise synopsis of key findings that addressed the questions and shaped the recommendations
- **Recommendations** – A summary of the framework of recommendations developed to maximize efficiencies and expand YA opportunities in Utah

Purpose and Context

In the fall of 2024, Talent Ready Utah (TRU) commissioned the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) to conduct an independent examination of Utah's youth apprenticeship YA) governance landscape. The UEPC team conducted a qualitative study in partnership with TRU to describe the current landscape for YA and identify opportunities for improved alignment, efficiencies, and interagency collaboration. This executive brief is a summary of the full report of this study.

This study responds to Senate Bill 122 (2024), which mandates "*design[ing] a framework and system for maximizing efficiencies and expanding youth apprenticeship opportunities for students*" in Utah. This legislative directive tasked TRU with staffing this study in collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), the Department of Workforce Services (DWS), and the Governor's Office.

Youth apprenticeships have gained increasing momentum and investment nationally and across Utah as a powerful strategy to create career pathways for youth, meet evolving workforce needs, and strengthen economic prosperity (e.g., AASA, 2020; Baddour & Hauge, 2020; Kuehn et al., 2023; Lerman, 2014). Growing interest, investment, and policy development around YA programs in Utah has involved multiple state agencies engaged in expanding opportunities for YA across the state.

Unlocking Opportunities through Youth Apprenticeships

The UEPC team developed a framework of five interconnected sets of levers driven by our analyses and findings to guide work to support unlocking opportunities for YA in Utah: Governance, Structural, Operational, Communication, and Strategic Investment and Capacity Building. The framework approach to organizing the recommendations emphasizes how these levers must work together to achieve meaningful system-wide change rather than a list of isolated recommendations.

Figure 1 below presents an overview of this framework of levers, with governance establishing the essential foundation. Our study design and key findings in the following sections reveal the evidence base that shaped this framework. The brief concludes with detailed recommendations and key actions for implementing each lever to advance Utah's youth apprenticeship ecosystem.

Figure 1. A Framework for Unlocking Opportunities through Youth Apprenticeships in Utah

GOVERNANCE LEVERS
Establish joint governance structures and clear roles, responsibilities, and authority across agencies to support coordinated YA implementation and decision-making alignment.

STRUCTURAL LEVERS
Develop standardized systems, information and data sharing infrastructure, and standards for program development to support efficient YA implementation.

OPERATIONAL LEVERS
Strengthen stakeholder processes, tools, and day-to-day implementation supports that enable coordinated YA delivery across agencies and programs.

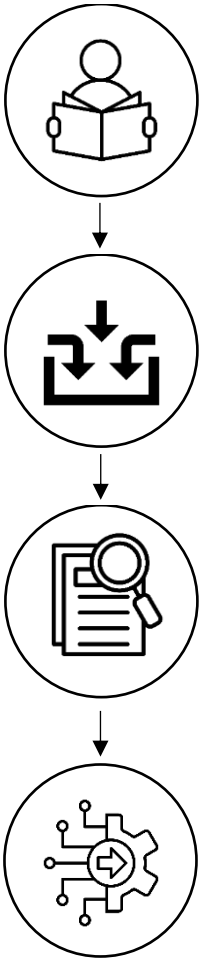
COMMUNICATION LEVERS
Create consistent messaging and information-sharing to enhance awareness, understanding, and engagement with YA.

STRATEGIC INVESTMENT AND CAPACITY LEVERS
Build sustainable funding and resources to support long-term YA program sustainability and growth through investment and capacity building.

***Note**: To make sense of the complex, multi-level factors influencing youth apprenticeship implementation and to inform the development of a coherent system, this report organizes the recommendations into a framework consisting of five overarching levers: Governance, Structural, Operational, Communication, and Strategic Investment and Capacity Building. Each of these levers reflects a critical dimension needed to address the identified six improvement priorities. The proposed recommendations attend to both immediate needs and longer-term approaches that will support scaling up and sustainability.*

Study Design

For this research partnership, the UEPC led the development of a comprehensive study design to fulfill the legislative mandate, working in collaboration with TRU, USBE, DWS, and the Governor's Office and guided by principles of shared inquiry and respect for partner expertise. As outlined below, the study design drew on multiple data sources from participating agencies and stakeholder groups, including industry, K–12 and higher education, and student apprentices.



Research Foundation

The UEPC conducted a thorough and systematic review of national and state-level research, policy guidance, and emerging practices related to youth apprenticeship. This review established a comprehensive understanding of current models, implementation challenges, and system-level design considerations. This foundation informed the development of data collection protocols, shaped the analytical framework, and grounded the resulting recommendations.

Data Collection

Primary data collection occurred during January and February 2025, utilizing 18 in-depth interviews and 11 focus groups with 38 participants representing state agencies, industry partners, K-12 districts, higher education institutions, and current youth apprentices. Primary sources were supplemented with 27 formal policy documents, 53 artifacts from agencies and stakeholders, and observation field notes from selected key events.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The UEPC research team employed structural coding (Saldaña, 2021), combining deductive and inductive approaches to systematically examine governance roles, interagency alignment, and participation barriers. This analytical strategy enabled the identification of cross-cutting themes across stakeholder groups and supported triangulation of findings to strengthen the applicability of conclusions.

Developing the Framework of Recommendations

The UEPC team used an iterative process to develop the framework of recommendations, moving between key findings from qualitative data analysis and insights gleaned from national youth apprenticeship research. This approach ensured that the framework addressed Utah-specific needs while incorporating research-informed practices from nationwide, resulting in actionable recommendations for strengthening Utah's youth apprenticeship system.

Research Questions Guiding the Full Youth Apprenticeships Study

1. How do TRU, DWS, USBE, and the Governor's Office understand their roles, responsibilities, and duties for YA?
2. How are TRU, DWS, USBE, and the Governor's Office efforts for YA aligned?
3. What are the current logistical, regulatory, and financial barriers to student, LEA, and employer participation in YA in Utah?
4. What are the opportunities for improved alignment, efficiencies, and interagency collaboration among TRU, DWS, USBE, and the Governor's Office to: (a) Increase youth apprenticeship offerings; (b) Increase student and employer participation in youth apprenticeships; (c) Formalize roles and streamline the use of existing infrastructure; (d) Leverage secondary and post-secondary educational programs; (e) Identify metrics to assess the success of youth apprenticeships (e.g. Department of Labor resources, Advance CTE); and (f) Potential state appropriations for youth apprenticeships specialists for scalability.

How State Agencies Understand their Roles, Responsibilities, and Duties for YA

The UEPC's analysis of interview and policy data revealed how state agency representatives understand their roles and responsibilities in supporting YA programs across seven key dimensions, listed and briefly described in the panel to the right. These dimensions of roles and responsibilities represent a spectrum of functions needed to support YA programming in Utah.

As seen in Figure 2 below, various roles and responsibilities are distributed across state agencies (e.g., TRU, DWS, USBE, and GO), with some agencies fulfilling all dimensions while others are more narrowly focused on specific areas. We caution against interpreting cases where multiple agencies share roles as a duplication of efforts. Indeed, this may reflect complementary rather than duplicative efforts as agencies serve different stakeholder groups or address distinct needs within the YA ecosystem. For example, while both TRU and DWS provide intermediary functions, they do so through different program approaches tailored to their respective stakeholders.

Figure 2. Dimensions of Roles and Responsibilities for YA by Agency

Roles and Responsibilities	TRU	DWS	USBE	GO
Leadership, governance, and policy	✓	✓	✓	◆
Program development and standards setting	✓	✓	◆	
Stakeholder partnership development	✓	✓	✓	
Intermediary functions	◆	✓		
Allocating funding and resources	✓	✓	✓	✓
Program Implementation and Compliance Support	✓	◆	✓	
Data collection and monitoring	✓	✓	✓	

Note. ✓ *indicates that an agency directly fulfills a given role or responsibility in some capacity for YA;* ◆ *indicates that a particular role or responsibility is most prominent or emphasized by that agency*

Multiple agencies fulfilling a given role should not be interpreted as a duplication of efforts as many key functions are supported by more than one agency meeting the needs of different program types and stakeholder groups.

Source. State agency representative interview transcripts and associated policy documents.

Dimensions of State Agencies' Roles and Responsibilities for YA

Leadership, Governance, & Policy. Setting direction, developing policy, and ensuring coordination across state workforce goals

Program Development & Standards Setting. Creating quality frameworks, educational standards, and curriculum models for YA experiences

Stakeholder Partnership Development. Recruiting and maintaining relationships with employers, LEAs, and IHEs through strategic outreach and relationship management

Intermediary Functions. Bridging employers, education systems, and students by facilitating connections and system navigation

Funding & Resource Management. Securing and administering financial resources, grants, and incentives for programs and participation

Program Implementation & Compliance Support. Supporting program registration, implementation, risk management, and documentation

Data, Accountability, & Reporting. Tracking outcomes, measuring effectiveness, and using data for continuous improvement

Examining Alignment of State Agencies' Efforts for YA

Effective implementation of youth apprenticeships in Utah requires strong alignment across state agencies. The UEPC team's analysis identified 10 key dimensions of interagency alignment:

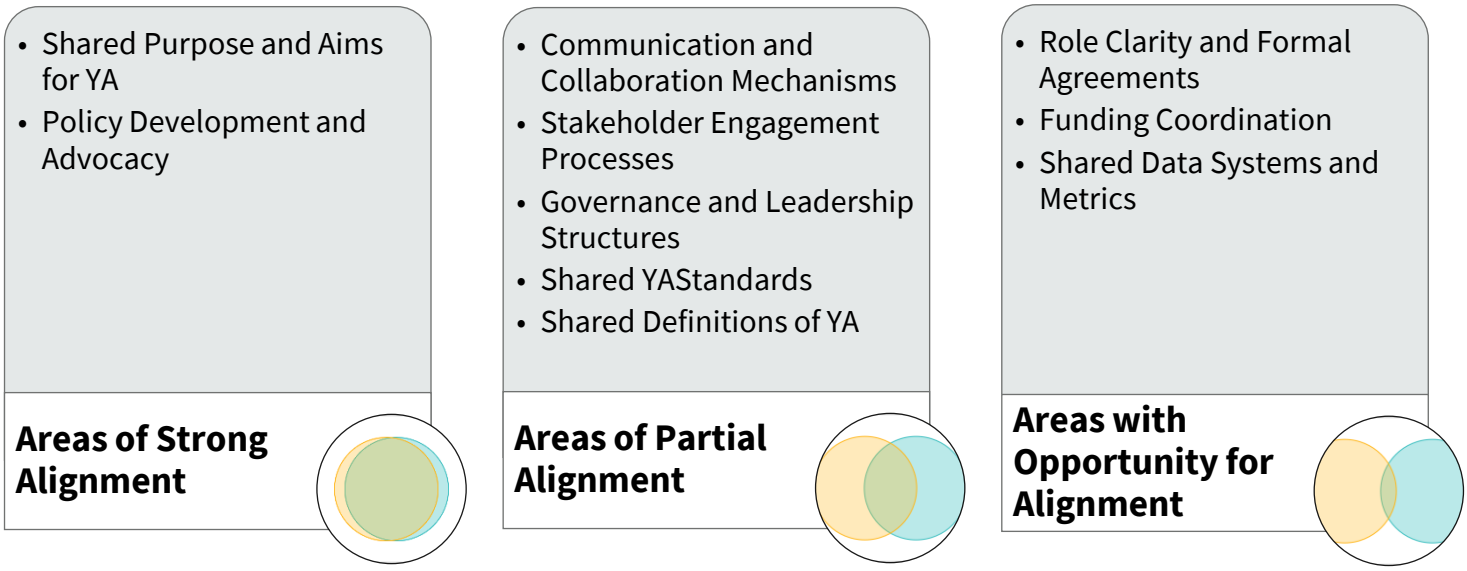
- Governance and leadership structures
- Shared purpose and aims for YA
- Shared definitions of YA
- Shared YA standards
- Role clarity and formal agreements
- Communication and collaboration mechanisms
- Funding coordination
- Shared data systems and metrics
- Stakeholder engagement processes
- Policy development and advocacy

Analysis revealed that these dimensions fall along a continuum of alignment strength. The UEPC team described the relative strength of interagency alignment for each dimension along the lines of three categories, as shown in Figure 3 below. We offer the following interpretations for each of the categories of strength of interagency alignment:

- **Strong interagency alignment** exists where there is consistency in evidence across state agencies with variation but no significant contradictions.
- **Partial interagency alignment** occurs where there is general agreement across agencies but with meaningful inconsistencies in theory or practice.
- **Opportunities for interagency alignment** represent areas of confusion within the system, including contradictions or lack of core shared understandings.

While agencies demonstrate strong alignment in some areas, particularly around a shared purpose, other dimensions present opportunities for improvement to strengthen interagency alignment. Understanding where Utah state agencies are strongly aligned versus where opportunities for strengthened alignment exist provides a foundation for targeted improvements to strengthen Utah's YA ecosystem.

Figure 3. Dimensions of Interagency Alignment by Strength of Alignment



Source. State agency representative interview transcripts and associated policy documents.

Exploring Barriers for YA in Utah

The UEPC team's analysis of interview and focus group data from all stakeholder groups revealed six broad categories of barriers affecting YA participation and implementation in Utah: **logistical and implementation barriers**, **regulatory and policy barriers**, **financial barriers**, **governance and coordination barriers**, **awareness and perception barriers**, and **participation and opportunity barriers**. These barriers impact students, employers, educational institutions, and the efficiency of state agency coordination efforts. Figure 4 below briefly describes and lists the dimensions of each barrier category.

The barriers identified by participants represent challenges at multiple levels of Utah's YA ecosystem. While these barriers present real challenges to expanding YA offerings and the participation of students and employers, they are not insurmountable. With intentional strategies, adequate resources, and coordinated efforts these barriers can be addressed to support sustaining and scaling YA programs for Utahns.

We encourage readers to consult the full report for more details and examples across the categories of barriers presented here.

Figure 4. Categories and Dimensions of Barriers to YA Participation

LOGISTICAL & IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS

Practical obstacles that hinder the operations and accessibility of YA programs:

- Transportation challenges
- Scheduling coordination
- Program structure and design disconnects
- Employer readiness for supporting YA
- Rural locale implementation challenges

REGULATORY & POLICY BARRIERS

Formal constraints stemming from external laws, rules, and institutional policies:

- External regulatory or policy constraints
- Institutional or organizational capacity constraints
- Program alignment and articulation issues

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Funding and resource limitations affecting the sustainability and capacity of YA initiatives:

- Adequate program funding for sustainability and growth
- Adequate staffing and personnel turnover (LEA, state agency)
- Employer ROI concerns
- Apprentice compensation issues and concerns

GOVERNANCE & COORDINATION BARRIERS

Organizational challenges stemming from barriers related to working across institutional boundaries of state agencies:

- Lack of role clarity and confusion for stakeholders
- Competing priorities and territorialness
- Personnel turnover and precarity of dependence on relationships and informal coordination
- Data and information sharing gaps

AWARENESS & PERCEPTION BARRIERS

Informational and attitudinal obstacles rooted in limited knowledge and/or misconceptions about YA:

- Awareness and information gaps (YA offerings and value)
- Preconceived notions about education and career paths
- Industry perceptions
- Workplace culture challenges
- Student motivation and commitment challenges

PARTICIPATION & OPPORTUNITY BARRIERS

Structural and situational challenges that limit access to YA programs for some regions and groups:

- Geographic challenges (particularly more remote and rural regions)
- Socioeconomic pressures and barriers for families and students
- Demographic or cultural challenges

Source. State agency representative and stakeholder interview transcripts.

Recommendations

The UEPC analysis guided the development of a comprehensive framework of recommendations organized into five mutually reinforcing sets of levers to inform action for systemic improvement of the ecosystem for YA in Utah: **Governance**, **Structural**, **Operational**, **Communication**, and **Strategic Investment and Capacity Building**. This approach recognizes that systemically strengthening YA in Utah requires more than piecemeal actions from any one set of levers—it demands coordinated action across multiple dimensions that work in concert to create systemic change. We intentionally begin with governance levers, which provide the foundation for role clarification, coordination, and strategic decision-making, enabling all other levers to function effectively. Figure 5 provides an overview of the key actions organized around this framework of strategic levers to guide improvement (see the full report for more elaboration on levers and key actions).

Figure 5. Recommendations of Key Actions by Lever Type

Suggested Citation: Reynolds, A. L., Rorrer, A. K., & Barton A. (2025). *Executive Brief: Unlocking Opportunities through Youth Apprenticeships in Utah*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.

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About the Utah Education Policy Center

The Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) is an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit research-based center at the University of Utah founded in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in 1990 and administered through the College of Education since 2007. The UEPC's mission is to bridge research, policy, and practice by conducting rigorous and comprehensive research and evaluations, and providing expert and research-informed technical assistance and professional learning. We empower educators, policymakers, and leaders to make research actionable and impactful to transform education across early childhood education, K-12 schools, and higher education.

We are committed to supporting the understanding of whether educational policies, programs, and practices are being implemented as intended, whether they are effective and impactful, and how they may be improved and scaled-up and become sustainable.

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