



## Building a Strong Workforce

Building a strong workforce is critical for the success of Northern Forest communities. A strong workforce not only helps businesses and institutions thrive, it also gives youth a sense of optimism about their career opportunities. Efforts to strengthen our workforce and invest in young people are especially important because of the region's aging population.

“For decades our largest export was our young population. They didn't feel like there was anything here for them.”

**Donna Wotton, Ticonderoga Revitalization Alliance**

The Northern Forest Center convened a conversation of regional experts working to change this dynamic in their communities. Panelists included **Dave Harkless** of [Littleton Bike and Fitness](#), who teaches a bike mechanic training program in his local New Hampshire high school; **Levi Irish** of the [Cold Hollow Career Center](#), who runs training programs geared to forestry businesses in northwestern Vermont; **Donna Wotton** of [Ticonderoga Revitalization Alliance](#), which sees its role as an economic development nonprofit as extending into workforce development programming for local high school students; and **Korah Soll** of [Rural Aspirations](#), a Maine-based nonprofit that explores collaborative models to curriculum development and professional development for educators.

Levi was joined by several students present in her classroom during the discussion, and powerfully called out the importance of engaging all students.

“We are doing something wrong as educators if our system tells students how broken they are, not how brilliant they are.”

**Levi Irish, Cold Hollow Career Center**

Each of the panelists described the programs that they're involved in to help students recognize their strengths, see meaningful career pathways, and connect to others in the community to broaden their vision of success.



“There’s a lot of students who want to stay here but don’t always see a positive economic future for their communities. Part of our job as an organization is to help them see that they are part of the future. If we can give them the skills to work through challenges, we are all working towards community vitality.”

**Korah Soll, Rural Aspirations**

Profound opportunities exist to address these challenges by:

- **Enhancing place-based education and strengthening experiential learning opportunities.** This can connect students to place, give them a sense of meaning in their education, and create social and economic links among businesses and students.
- **Engaging students at multiple points in their educational journeys** rather than waiting until 10th or 11th grade. For example, the students in Levi’s class described the pride they experienced when they hosted a site visit for second graders in their school to see their projects.
- **Recognizing that intelligence comes in many forms,** and that many rural students are hands-on learners who have been exposed to family businesses in agriculture, forestry or other applied fields. Applied curriculum analysis can yield opportunities to activate students of many backgrounds and enhance their connections to place.
- **Forming partnerships of many kinds.** These can involve traditional entities like teachers and guidance counselors, but can also leverage additional support, resources, and networks from nonprofits, local leaders, businesses, and local employees in diverse fields. Donna pointed out that these partnerships can grow organically: “Get something going and it snowballs! A lot of our employers have given us the best ideas. It has really swept through our community; they all see the benefits. Open the doors and invite everyone in!”
- **Redefining success.** Dave noted, “It’s not important to get every kid into a two-year or a four-year college. It’s important to get them to feel successful and smart.” Many employers are desperate for employees to fill well-paid, skilled positions that students can fill without incurring a lot of student loans.

Korah urged others to join in this effort and suggested a simple way to get going is to “start a conversation from a hopeful place.”

The impact of this work can be deeply powerful. Creating hope and optimism among students can in turn affect families, boost community morale, and lift up our collective sense of opportunity. Moreover, rooting education in place and turning education into an active process rather than a passive one puts youth in a position to gain agency over the future of not just their own trajectories, but the well-being of their communities.



*The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The Building a Strong Workforce webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.*