

A Look At Creating Regional Talent Solutions: 3 Promising Practices in Northwest Florida

Florida Chamber Foundation Regional Research Brief



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There is something exciting happening in northwest Florida, and it's not just the Navy's Blue Angels or the high-performance sailors of American Magic.

Nor is it just the [recent announcement](#) by Governor DeSantis that Florida's Job Growth Grant Fund awarded \$9 million to expand shipbuilding in the Port of Pensacola.

It's the education-workforce pipelines that have emerged across the region since 2023. And the impact they're making is remarkable.

Inspired by the Florida Chamber Foundation Future of Work Florida's Industry Immersion event this past June, this case study spotlights three new education-workforce programs that are advancing the future of work in northwest Florida.

The examples below explore the power of strategic partnerships between Florida businesses and local communities, showcasing how, when done right, they can move the needle on producing workforce-ready talent within a region and serve as replicable models for workforce development programs across Florida and the United States.

The Florida Chamber Foundation is grateful to American Magic, BlueWind Technology, ST Engineering, the Hobbs Center at Pensacola State College (PSC), the University of West Florida (UWF) Talent Catalyst, and our Future of Work Advisory Board Member, the Children's Home Society (CHS), for sharing their promising practices.

Northwest Florida Snapshot

Among many things, one thing that is clear in northwest Florida is that it's growing...and changing.

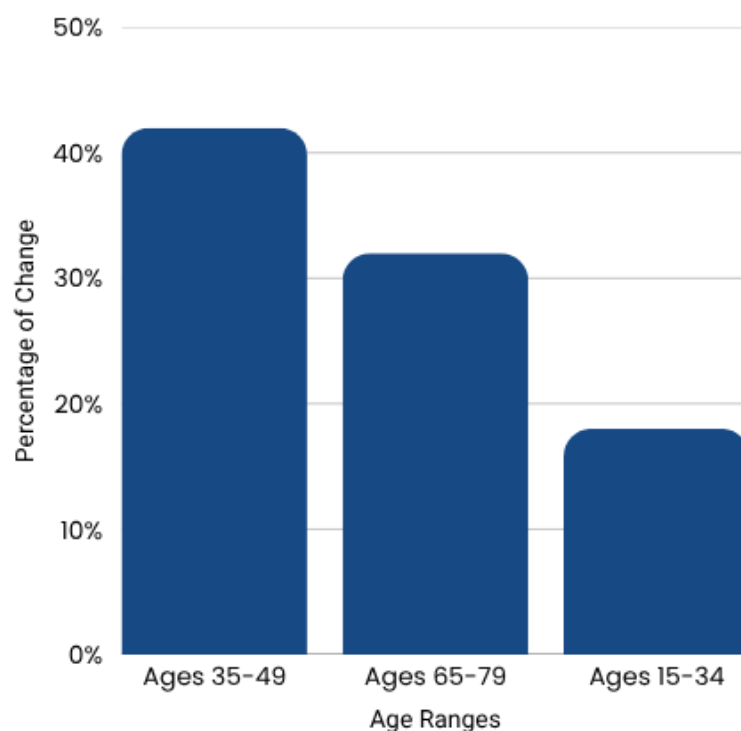
Since 2020, the population of northwest Florida's counties—Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Walton—has grown by 9 percent. This is not unlike the rest of Florida. Today, Florida's population growth tops the nation, growing 12 percent since 2020. That ties it with Idaho and outpaces Texas, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Georgia by respective 2, 3, and 6 percentage points.¹

Jobs have also grown as a result. According to county data we report on our Florida Scorecard, job growth totals 1.8 percent across the region. But what we've also calculated is that nearly 28,000 jobs have to be filled by 2030 to meet our *Florida 2030 Blueprint* employment targets. That is a challenge for northwest Florida, where population growth is mostly led by middle-aged adults. Today, 42 percent of the population is between the ages of 35 and 49. And what's more, the region is aging: adults ages 65 to 79 accounted for 32 percent of the region's population change since 2020.

¹ Lightcast, Population Demographics Map, United States, 2026-2026, (accessed Aug 13, 2026)

Compare that to the 18 percent change originating from those aged 15 to 34 ¹, and it is safe to say that northwest Florida is facing, as Lightcast’s Senior Labor Economist, Ron Hetrick has shown, similar demographic challenges as the rest of the United States.² And even though our Florida Scorecard shows that the high school graduation rate is as high as 93 percent across all four counties, the message is clear: the region needs more talent.

The challenge facing northwest Florida employers now is, therefore, one being faced across the nation: what can we do to ensure that our region’s youth and young adults are compelled to continue nourishing it as a place to build their professional lives.



¹ Lightcast, Population Demographics Report, Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton Counties, 2020-2026 (accessed Aug 11, 2026).

² Ron Hetrick, et al. “The Rising Storm: One Year Later”, Lightcast (2026); Hetrick, et al. “The Rising Storm: Building A Future-Ready Workforce to Withstand the Looming Labor Shortage”, Lightcast (2024).

Business Remains Strong in Northwest Florida

Overall, business is good across the Northwest Florida region. Jobs are steadily growing, and all signs indicate that this growth is sustainable.

In 2020, there were over a quarter of a million jobs across all four Northwest Florida counties. By 2025, that number grew to nearly 400,000. Of the region's top employers, military leads the way with 30,000 plus workers, followed by full-service restaurant employees at just over 20,000. Federal civil servants, exclusive of postal workers, account for the third-highest occupation at just over 16,000, while Elementary and Secondary School teachers account for more than 13,500.¹

Occupations employing 10,000+ (2026) Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton Counties, FL			
NAICS	Description	Total	Percent share of jobs
		361,508	
901200	Federal Government, Military	32,151	8.9%
722511	Full-Service Restaurants	20,560	5.7%
901199	Federal Government, Civilian, Excluding Postal Service	16,330	4.5%
903611	Elementary and Secondary Schools (Local Government)	13,739	3.8%
722513	Limited-Service Restaurants	13,485	3.7%
622110	General Medical and Surgical Hospitals	11,739	3.2%
903999	Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals	10,934	3.0%
522130	Credit Unions	10,243	2.8%
Source:	Lightcast, Industry Demographics Table, Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton Counties, Florida, 2026 (accessed Aug 13, 2026)		

¹ NAICS Codes: 901200 – Federal Government, Military; 722511 – Full-Service Restaurants; 901199 Federal Government, Civilian, Excluding Postal Service; 903611 – Elementary and Secondary Schools (Local Government). Lightcast, Occupation Demographics Table, Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton Counties, 2026 (accessed Aug 11, 2026).

According to data we've compiled from the Employer Database offered by FloridaCommerce, the top 10 single employers exclusive of military, civil servants, and education professionals in the region are listed in the table below.

Top 10 Single Employers for Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton Counties, FL September 2026		
NAICS	Description	Number Employed
522130	Navy Federal Credit Union	8,713
455211	Walmart	6,405
622110	Ascension Health Ministry Service	4,675
622110	Baptist Health Care	3,835
445110	Publix	3,092
622110	West Florida Regional Medical Center	1,422
713990	Morale Welfare & Recreation	1,191
622110	Fort Walton Beach Medical Center	1,066
721110	Sandestin Beach Hotel, Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort	1,057
541214	St. Joe Resort	781
Source: Employer Database, FL Commerce, floridajobs.org (accessed Sept 08, 2026)		

In a word, government, education, hospitality, and healthcare shape northwest Florida's workforce, forces driven by the region's Air Force and Naval presence.

And while northwest Florida is prized by the U.S. military, it is also well known for several industries and its unique connections to land, air, and water. What follows attests as much.

American Magic

The story of American Magic is one that showcases how prestigious high-performance sports teams can transform local communities in Florida.

The professional sailing team for the New York City Yacht Club, American Magic came to Pensacola in 2018. For Tyson Lamond, its Chief Operating Officer, it was northwest Florida's attractiveness as an ideal location to live and work that convinced the team to relocate from their operations port in Newport, Rhode Island. As Lamond recounts, it was ultimately Pensacola's "welcoming community" and "untapped port potential" that made them "fall in love with the city." And since, that love for Pensacola has grown into robust relationships with the local community.

Lamond says that American Magic is there to stay, and the key to staying is ensuring a sustainable workforce. Consequently, American Magic has struck relationships with the region's largest higher education institutions, including the University of West Florida (UWF) and Pensacola State College (PSC), and one of Florida's top community organizations, the Children's Home Society.

As Lamond recounts, it was with PSC that American Magic established its first relationship. After connecting with PSC President, Dr. C. Edward Meadows, the idea was to tap PSC engineering students for interns in Computer Numerical Control (CNC in the sailing world) and composite cutting. It was an immediate success.

In 2025, Lamond and the American Magic team were thrilled to offer PSC graduate, Braydon Sult, a full-time position following his six-week internship, noting that Sult not only had the skills; He had an “amazing attitude” that gelled well with the team. Since Mr. Sult, four others have participated in the program with all being hired full-time, totaling five overall.

For American Magic, the right communication skills are vital, stresses Lamond. “Kids struggle with being able to talk to people,” he notes, and as part of their program, he and the American Magic team “assess how [interns] deal with conflict.” Importantly, Lamond underscores that interns “need to be coachable to get better” and they also need to be “open to candid feedback.”

This commitment to coaching and fostering strong interpersonal skills is what brought American Magic to partner with the Children’s Home Society of Greater Pensacola. One of our Florida Chamber Foundation’s Future of Work Advisory Board Members, the Children’s Home Society (CHS), tackles generational childhood by implementing “cradle-to-career” pathways for children and families across Florida. Since beginning their partnership, American Magic has welcomed four teens from CHS Greater Pensacola as interns, helping them to simultaneously obtain their GED. **“These are all people who deserve a chance so badly,”** Lamond emphasizes, and it was wanting to give back to the region they love that galvanized American Magic to develop the community partnerships they cultivated.

¹ “PSC student’s internship with American Magic lead to full-time career” , Pensacola State College, April 25, 2025, updated July 28, 2026 (<https://pensacolastate.edu/psc-students-internship-with-american-magic-leads-to-full-time-career/>)

Leah Harrison, Executive Director of the Emerald Coast & Greater Pensacola division of the CHS, could not speak more highly about their partnership with American Magic. “Seeing what the team at American Magic is doing,” she explains, “they are really providing these kids with a hope they did not have before, exposing them to an industry they probably did not know about before.” But more importantly, Harrison notes, the four teen interns that American Magic has welcomed from the YouthWorks program of the Greater Pensacola CHS have left feeling “excited and included...that they are smart and that they have a lot to give.”

“American Magic is bringing this youth in and saying, ‘we want you here,’” Harrison states.

American Magic is therefore much more than a shipbuilder in the growing maritime industrial base across Florida. It is a champion of what we at the Florida Chamber Foundation call “soft skills,” or employability skills.¹ And it is this that has brought American Magic to build what Lamond describes as “an absolutely perfect relationship” with the region’s most-attended university: the University of West Florida.

¹ Michael Fechter of Florida Trend highlighted the Foundation’s Workforce Needs Study 2.0 in their June 2026 issue. See “Hard Push on Soft Skills: Schools across Florida are emphasizing soft skills to bridge workforce gaps”, Florida Trend (June 2026), pp.96-100.

Having partnered with the UWF Talent Catalyst since the Spring of 2025, American Magic is one of the program's longest partners. Lamond and the American Magic team targeted four specific areas: Information Technology & Design, Modeling, Hydraulics, and Electronics. As of August 2026, American Magic has hired eight students through the program with four transitioning to full-time employment following graduation this past May, and the remaining four beginning work this coming fall.

The UWF Talent Catalyst partnership offers American Magic more than access to student talent. The program combines three elements that distinguish its model. One being paid, part-time professional positions, designed to provide students with meaningful, long-term experience through graduation. Second, an industry mentor from the employer who is not the student's direct supervisor. And third, a professional development course focused on the essential workplace skills employers consistently identify as critical to success.

Laura Swann, Director of UWF's Office of Workforce Development, explains that these three elements have been central to the program since it launched in Fall 2024. Through the professional development course, students strengthen skills such as communication, teamwork, professionalism, time management, critical thinking, problem-solving, and conflict resolution while developing emotional intelligence and earning the Florida Ready to Work Soft Skills credential. The Florida Chamber Foundation's first Florida Workforce Needs Study in 2020 informed the push to incorporate virtual Florida Ready to Work certificates into Florida law in 2023, this being the same year that Swann's colleague, Dr. Sherry Hartnett, founded UWF's Office of Workforce Development.

The mentoring relationship that the UWF Talent Catalyst fosters provides another important layer of support. Each student is paired with someone from the company other than the student's supervisor, creating a trusted space for professional guidance and reflection. "The mentee drives the mentoring relationship," Swann explains, identifying the goals, questions, and challenges they want to explore with their mentor. Students also participate in a learning community that allows them to build relationships with peers and to navigate similar transitions into the professional workplace.

This integrated model benefits not only American Magic, but UWF Talent Catalyst's 24 business partners and the students who participate in the program. By combining sustained paid experience, industry mentoring, and intentional professional development, the program helps students build both the technical experience and professional skills needed to succeed after graduation.

BlueWind Technology

Prioritizing support for Florida's future workforce has laid the foundation for a remarkable workforce program being practiced at BlueWind Technology, a manufacturer of composites.

"Composites are complex technologies with a simple foundation," explains BlueWind Technology President, Henry Kelley.

"Composites are any two materials mixed together to make a third." Notably, they are "strong in all directions, extremely lightweight, and highly resistant," making them apt materials to manufacture the nacelles that encase wind turbines being produced by Penscola's own GE Vernova.

Like American Magic, BlueWind Technology has been tapping the UWF Talent Catalyst for interns since the Spring of 2025. But its relationship with UWF began immediately when BlueWind started in 2019. As of July 2026, six UWF graduates were full-time employees at BlueWind, one from the UWF Talent Catalyst, while six more were undergoing their UWF Talent Catalyst internship with near full assurance of being offered full-time employment. Their relationship is therefore just as robust as American Magic's.

Yet, one of the most impressive contributions BlueWind is making in northwest Florida is being a major second-chance employer.

Second-chance employers hire people with previous experience in the justice system, giving them a real shot at reintegrating into the community. Kelley takes pride in what he has been able to do at BlueWind. **"Many believed they were ineligible because they had a record,"** Kelley highlights. BlueWind wanted to give them an opportunity.

When the program began in 2023, BlueWind hired 48 second-chance employees, accounting for half their workforce at the time. That number increased across 2024 and 2025, rising to 55 second-chance employees in 2024 and peaking at 76 in 2025. By all measures, the program is working, further bolstered by BlueWind's close relationship with the Florida Foundation for Correctional Excellence (FFCE), which we highlighted in the Second-Chance Hiring in Florida guide, co-authored with the FFCE earlier this year. Second-chance citizens come to BlueWind with a record. But after training and full-time work, they leave BlueWind trained and confident to move on to build a career.

"We solve our own problems," says Kelley proudly, and the second-chance employment program is "all homegrown."

Looking forward, Kelley intends to promote what BlueWind has done as a promising practice for other businesses across Florida. **“We need to train employers to be open to second-chance employees,” says Kelley. “These guys don’t want to go back to prison. They want to work,”** And as one of their current infusion supervisors attests, BlueWind gave him the opportunity to not just make good money. But importantly, BlueWind makes him feel valued. For him, the BlueWind second-chance program has bred the happiness he now feels after experiencing 19 years of incarceration.

ST Engineering

The programs at BlueWind and American Magic vividly demonstrate what’s possible when industry and education align.

The final program we spotlight here has been led by ST Engineering, the world’s largest airframe Maintenance, Repair & Overhaul (MRO) solution provider, whose Pensacola operations, which we discovered over the course of this report, are truly unique.

It was a visit to ST Engineering that brought us to look at northwest Florida and Pensacola to begin with. Following our Future of Work Florida initiative’s week-long Industry Immersion in June 2026. That month, we traveled to Pensacola to visit with local northwest Florida teachers who were offered a tour of Ascension Sacred Heart Hospital and ST Engineering to see how their work in the classroom is vital to shaping Florida’s future workforce.

And what we saw on the ground at ST Engineering was especially impressive.

ST Engineering came to Pensacola in 2018. Similar to American Magic, it was the city's potential for growth that brought them to initially establish an airframe MRO hangar attached to Pensacola International Airport. And the company's impact on the Greater Pensacola community has been growing ever since.

Between 2018 and 2025, ST Engineering invested \$60 million to build its MRO hangar – the first at Pensacola International – as well as created 630-plus jobs, generated average annual total cash earnings of approximately \$71,000 for Aircraft Maintenance Technician jobs, and delivered over 500 planes from its MRO Facility. And in that time, it invested more than \$300,000 to help Pensacola State College open an FAA-certified (Code 147) Airframe & Powerplant (A&P) school on Airport property.

If anything is clear, ST Engineering is committed to bolstering northwest Florida as a powerhouse for the future of Florida's aviation manufacturers—a win-win for ST Engineering and for our state's economy and workforce.

We can confirm as much: In doing the research for this case study, we found that ST Engineering's site is one of the only in the United States with an active MRO facility next to an A&P training school. It is the only one currently located at a major international airport.¹

¹ We discovered this by examining the lists for MRO (FAA Code 145) schools and A&P (FAA Code 147) schools using the FAA's AVInfo Find a Facility Dashboard. While the Western Michigan University College of Aviation is MRO and A&P certified and located at an airport, the Battle Creek Executive airport at Kellogg Field serves smaller aircraft than those accommodated by Pensacola International Airport. FAA AVInfo Find a Facility Dashboard accessed Aug 10, 2026.

In a word, those trained or in-training at the Pensacola facilities are currently the most uniquely trained MRO and A&P technicians in the world.

Engineering since 2022, Lee knows the current pain points facing the aerospace industry as a whole. **“More people are retiring than coming in,”** he says, but having the Navy Air Station alongside Eglin Air Force Base has meant that **“Pensacola is a hub for fresh talent in aviation.”** He’s right. As Michael Listau, Dean of Workforce Education at PSC, states, the A&P program between ST Engineering and PSC is expanding to include a new facility that will accommodate 200 upon completion. That facility is projected to open in March 2027.

Meeting Florida’s Workforce Needs

Just a glance at these programs shows the power of innovative education-workforce partnerships. Moreover, it shows just how alert Northwest Florida’s businesses and organizations are to the latest shift in the labor sands in Florida.

The UWF Talent Catalyst has 21 partners, most being manufacturers of advanced or defense technologies or civil and mechanical engineers. Along with their standalone A&P school with ST Engineering, PSC has a similar focus, with Dean Listau leading a program that offers 78 various certificates across 32 subjects. And BlueWind Technology is committed to being a place to train formerly incarcerated individuals in composites, what BlueWind Technology’s President Kelley admits is a “specialized niche.”

Yet, if anything has become strikingly clear in 2026, it's exactly what Ryan Lee from ST Engineering noted about aerospace engineering: more are retiring from technical trades than entering it.

American Magic, BlueWind Technology, ST Engineering, the UWF Talent Catalyst, PSC, and the Children's Home Society of Greater Pensacola are meeting this moment.

In closing, let's look at some findings from a recent Florida Chamber Foundation report, the [Top 30 High-Demand Careers in Florida: Math Skills Edition](#).¹ The report identifies the 30 most high-demand careers across Florida's 21 workforce regions and the math skills that these careers require. Projected into 2033, we show that the Top 5 in-demand careers are:

- General and Operations Managers
- Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers
- Registered Nurses
- First-Line Supervisors of Office and Administrative Support Workers
- Sales Representatives of Services (excl. Advertising, Insurance, Financial Services, and Travel)

These closely align with what we identified in the Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Walton workforce regions, but what surprised us was how in-demand the Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers occupation will be into 2033.

PSC is answering that need. On their East Milton campus, just up I-10 east of Pensacola, PSC has a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program with a 91 percent completion rate. This is impressive, especially as the program enrolled 148 for the 2025-2026 academic year.

That translates to 135 completing the program. And what's more, 85 percent had found work by July 2026. Among other training programs at PSC's East Milton campus are a Diesel Maintenance Technician Program that began in the Spring of 2026 and a forthcoming Marine Services Technologies program to meet the need, as American Magic is, for marine engineers and shipbuilders at the port of Pensacola.

Exciting things for education-workforce pipelines are certainly underway in northwest Florida.

The programs highlighted above are in direct alignment with the Florida Chamber Foundation's Future of Work Florida mission. These forces not only drive change across Florida. They are exemplary of what is possible when business and education align to solve a common challenge. Florida, along with the rest of the United States, is and will be facing workforce challenges into the next generation. But what will solve the workforce challenges Florida faces are the promising practices that are being implemented by organizations such as American Magic, BlueWind Technology, ST Engineering, the UWF Talent Catalyst, Pensacola State College, and the Children's Home Society. It will take a collaborative effort to secure Florida's future.

To learn more about the Chamber Foundation's ongoing research work related to achieving the Florida 2030 Blueprint goals on creating stronger talent pipelines, contact the research team at research@flchamber.com.

Thank You

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- **Laura Sann**, Director, Office of Workforce Development, Haas Center, University of West Florida

For more information, visit

- [UWF Talent Catalyst](#)
- [PSC Career & Technical Education, Workforce Education](#)
- [American Magic](#)
- [BlueWind Technology](#)
- [ST Engineering](#)
- [Top 30 High-Demand Careers in Florida: Math Skills Edition](#),
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