annual report 2025



ILLINOIS SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY COALITION
from idea to impact

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April 2026

LETTER FROM THE CEO

Dear ISTC Community,

As I reflect on 2025, I am incredibly proud of what our team accomplished. While there are countless metrics to share that demonstrate our success, what I am most proud of cannot easily be measured: ***grit***.

We are a small team with a profound mission. Like many organizations, this year tested our limits as we navigated what can only be described as unprecedented times.

It took grit to stay optimistic, to not waver when the value of science and education was called into question, and to stay steadfast in our belief that inclusivity is not a weakness, but an essential element of progress. It took a shared sense of purpose from our partners—the businesses, universities, state government, and fellow non-profits—to lean in when the need was greatest.

I'd like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the entire ISTC team for their incredible dedication over the past year. Everyone, from our newest recruits to our long-standing team members, has contributed significantly to our success by maintaining a collaborative spirit and agility during uncertainty.

As we look toward 2026, the challenges ahead remain substantial, but our collective resolve is stronger than ever. We will continue to operate with the resilience and determination that defined 2025, confident that the investment put into building a strong team and the commitments from our invaluable partners will continue turning ideas into impact for Illinois.

Sincerely,



Kate Calabra

Kate Calabra
CEO

INTRODUCTION

COMMUNITY CONDUCTOR:

the power of partnership

On its own, energy is relegated to static and spontaneous connection. It is through the intentional direction of a conductor that energy is able to move across systems, turning potential into motion. That idea shaped the Illinois Science and Technology Coalition's (ISTC) work throughout 2025, as collaboration between partners and sectors sparked measurable progress.

ISTC weaves a strong thread between data, education, innovation, and advocacy. This year, ISTC took important steps to build a stronger foundation for data-informed decision-making, while continuing to engage students, educators, industry partners, and researchers. These collective experiences help shape how policies and funding priorities advance, increasing opportunity and economic growth in Illinois.

Innovation efforts continued to scale through the Illinois Innovation Voucher Program, delivered in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). Over $2.4 million was awarded across 34 projects, supporting applied research collaborations between small and mid-sized businesses and universities. Through these partnerships, companies accessed specialized expertise, facilities, and technical capacity to move ideas closer to market, while universities engaged more directly with industry challenges. As participation increased, so did the role of research as a driver of economic activity and applied innovation.

That same focus on insight and application carried into ISTC's data work. Data played a central role in how priorities were set and progress was measured. In 2025, ISTC welcomed a new Illinois Innovation Index Manager to increase capacity and open the door to future partnerships. The resulting thought leadership model will bring about a more comprehensive understanding of R&D activity, talent trends, and economic competitiveness.

Those insights directly informed how ISTC approached education. Programs continued to connect high school learners with mentors, applied experiences, and real-world problem-solving. In 2025, ISTC's education programs served more than 1,200 high school students, expanding access to career-oriented learning.

Additionally, the Teacher Externship Program reached its fifth year of giving educators direct exposure to workplace environments that they then translated into classroom practice. As a result, students gained a clearer understanding of pathways into STEM, and educators are better equipped to relate learning with opportunity.

This year, ISTC increased team capacity in order to sustain the momentum behind the mission. New roles across partnerships, data, education, and events bolstered the organization's ability to engage stakeholders, respond to emerging needs, and uplift initiatives. This evolution reflects a more intentional approach to how ISTC operates, with a focus on coordination and connection.

Looking ahead, ISTC will continue to serve as a conductor within this ecosystem, bringing together partners across sectors and directing their collective energy toward shared goals. By building on these partnerships and expanding collaboration statewide, ISTC will accelerate innovation, broaden access to opportunity, and support a more dynamic and inclusive future for all in Illinois.



ADVANCING OPPORTUNITY

Reaching Goals Through Collaboration

BY: **JOZIE CROUCH**

PHOTGRAPH BY: **TONY MUCCI**

Illinois hosts an innovation economy characterized by evolution and vibrance. However, this flourishing nature doesn't come effortlessly, nor is it created in a silo. Institutions like ISTC's partner, the Office of Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology at the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), spent 2025 increasing accessibility to capital and commercialization in order to continue elevating Illinois on a national and global scale.

Through a wide variety of high-impact and intentionally positioned initiatives, DCEO sparked momentum that lasted throughout the year. "These efforts, delivered in partnership with academia, industry, and organizations like ISTC, directly advanced access to capital, strengthened infrastructure, and amplified Illinois' visibility worldwide," said Kristi Dula, Deputy Director at DCEO.

By investing $7 million through the Tech Incubator Enhancement Grant Program, DCEO supported incubators across four regions and launched two new hubs. They also built on existing programs, expanding the SBIR/STTR State Matching Program by increasing Phase I awards and introducing Phase II—making Illinois one of the most competitive states in the nation for federally funded R&D through this program.

Complementary to the state matching program, DCEO partnered with ISTC to execute the Illinois Innovation Vouchers program. This initiative connected small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to university research expertise and distributed $2.44M in funding to support R&D projects.

> *"Partnerships are essential because they combine the reach and resources of government with the expertise and networks of organizations like ISTC. By working together, we can lower barriers for entrepreneurs, expand access to technical assistance and research, and ensure that opportunities aren't limited to major hubs."*



KRISTI DULA
Deputy Director
EIT at DCEO

After a productive year, DCEO is headed into 2026 with a goal that many in the industry can connect with: to build off the successes of 2025 in the hopes of broadening their impact.

"While access to capital, commercialization, and equity remain core priorities, our approach is evolving to deliver greater scale and visibility statewide," Kristi said.

Connection will remain a key tool in accomplishing this. Convening institutions and resources is what will keep Illinois' growth not only sustainable but also accessible to all that call it home. Kristi elaborated, saying, "These collaborations create a more inclusive innovation ecosystem where businesses of all sizes and regions can thrive."

ILLINOIS INNOVATION VOUCHER PROGRAM

Strengthening statewide research and industry collaboration

In 2025, the Illinois Innovation Voucher Program accelerated.

Demand expanded across numerous regions and industries as more small and mid-sized businesses (SMEs) sought structured partnerships with Illinois universities to advance applied research and commercialization. Conducted in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO), the Illinois Innovation Voucher program provided over $2.4 million in funding during its second year to reduce barriers between academic research and industry need by making university expertise, facilities, and technical capacity more accessible to companies.

This year marked a clear shift from proving a model to strengthening a statewide system.



> *Through the Illinois Innovation Voucher Program, we were able to collaborate closely with Northwestern University's REACT Lab to tackle complex engineering challenges. The program enabled rapid iteration and deeper technical validation, strengthening both our designs and our team's confidence moving forward as we seek further funding and customer exploration.*
>
> *- Youssef Abdelhalim, Aster Space*

2025 by the numbers

34 awarded projects were announced for the 2025 cohort

+$2.4M invested in collaborative R&D

145% increase in applications year-over-year

137% growth in program engagement

12 industries activated across the innovation economy

10+ universities advancing applied research partnerships

The program intentionally broadened its footprint across Illinois in 2025. The ISTC team conducted targeted outreach visits in Springfield, Champaign-Urbana, Carbondale, DeKalb, and other regions, bringing the program directly to campuses and local business communities. These engagements deepened ties with university entrepreneurship centers, research offices, and technology transfer teams while introducing more companies to university-supported R&D as a viable growth strategy.

Institutions and ecosystem partners also played a more active role in advancing applied research collaboration statewide. Projects spanned 12 distinct industry sectors, reflecting demand from manufacturing, life sciences, agriculture, energy, advanced materials, and emerging technologies. As this engagement broadened, the program refined its structure to ensure quality kept pace with growth. ISTC clarified guidance, reinforced review standards, and sharpened matching resources so each project could be paired with the right academic expertise.

THIS STRENGTHENED ALIGNMENT IS WHAT GIVES THE PROGRAM ITS **broader impact**



FOR SMEs

The Illinois Innovation Voucher Program unlocks access to specialized facilities, research teams, and technical infrastructure that would otherwise be financially or logistically out of reach. This enables companies to validate technologies, refine processes, and reduce risk before commercialization.



FOR UNIVERSITIES

Collaborations strengthen both academic capacity and workforce development by generating applied research opportunities, deepening industry relationships, and expanding experiential learning for graduate and undergraduate students.



FOR ILLINOIS

By supporting in-state research partnerships, the program strengthens business R&D activity, encourages companies to scale locally, and reinforces competitiveness in high-growth sectors. The result is a more durable innovation infrastructure rooted in collaboration.

WHAT GROWTH TELLS US

Beyond project funding, the program's role matured significantly in 2025. Companies increasingly sought early guidance on scope development and research alignment, while universities engaged more proactively in supporting applied industry partnerships. What began as a funding mechanism has evolved into connective infrastructure that leads to sustainable research-industry collaboration.

1	Companies are actively seeking university-supported R&D.
2	Trust in the program model is increasing statewide.
3	Structured matchmaking reduces barriers to applied research partnerships.
4	Universities are positioning research as a driver of regional economic impact.
5	The ecosystem is ready for scaled, durable collaboration.

2025 research network

The program is activating Illinois' higher education research ecosystem at scale:

- **11** projects with Northwestern University
- **7** projects with University of Illinois Chicago
- **+8** additional institutions engaged, including Bradley University, DePaul University, Illinois Institute of Technology, Loyola University Chicago, Northern Illinois University, Rosalind Franklin University, University of Chicago and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

2025 Cohort

- **Archer Career**
  Industry: Education
- **Arma Biosciences**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Aster Space Technologies LLC**
  Industry: Space Tech
- **BAnta Pharmaceuticals, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Biagon, Inc.**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Cellmend Technologies**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Coral Innovations**
  Industry: Clean Tech
- **Enzyme by Design, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Grapherry**
  Industry: Energy
- **ImmPro, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Kilwa Technologies**
  Industry: Fin Tech
- **Lux Blox, LLC**
  Industry: Education
- **memQ, Inc.**
  Industry: Quantum
- **Midwest Bioprocessing Center**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **NETenergy**
  Industry: Energy
- **Opera Bioscience**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Phoenix Bean, LLC**
  Industry: Food Tech
- **Qolab, Inc**
  Industry: Quantum
- **Retina Robotics™**
  Industry: Transportation & Logistics
- **Says**
  Industry: IT & SaaS
- **Seq Solutions**
  Industry: Clean Tech
- **Sibel Health, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Sigenics, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **SMARTCharts**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **SolarMantle**
  Industry: Manufacturing
- **SuperBetter**
  Industry: Education
- **Tanda Biotech Corporation**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **TearDx, LLC**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **The Loop Speech, Language, and Learning**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Tiptek, LLC**
  Industry: Semiconductor
- **Ultra Small Fibers**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **UP Oncolytics**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Valjuvant Corporation**
  Industry: Healthcare
- **Vastimmune Biologics, Inc**
  Industry: Healthcare





TURNING DATA INTO DIRECTION

Converging Perspectives in Data Work

BY: **JOZIE CROUCH**

ILLUSTRATION BY: **VALENTINA PULLA**

If innovation is the motor powering progress, data is the steering mechanism responsible for keeping the industry on course towards success and new opportunities. Data equips participants in the economy to make the choices that are right for them. Or, as Meg Bates, Director of Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), defined it, "[Data] is information about the world around us—about experiences and outcomes—that is collected and intended to answer questions."

Answering questions is key to shaping the industry in a way that enables continued expansion of the Illinois economy and improvement in the quality of life for its residents. Questions about the labor market, which IWERC in particular attempts to answer, span a range of purposes and constituents. What are the current workforce development efforts in place? How effective are they at preparing the next generation? What are educational institutions putting an emphasis on currently? Ultimately each of these answers is a piece of the broader economic outlook on both individual and statewide levels.



MEG BATES
Director
IWERC

"People are always responsive to labor market data. They're looking at those indicators to understand where the economy is going and what they need to prepare for, for better or for worse."

With so many people relying on data sets to inform their decisions, investment in research is crucial for ensuring accuracy, consistency, and accessibility. Without up-to-date data, leaders aren't in a position to assess their choices and adapt necessary changes.

"I don't understand how you can make policy or lead educational and workforce institutions without data," Meg explained. "You can't base what you're doing on anecdotes or wishful thinking. You need to be evaluating what you're doing throughout the process in order to learn what works and what doesn't."

One way to increase the investment and support that research receives is through collaboration. In 2025, ISTC began exploring a partnership with IWERC to revive the STEM Talent Index. The intention of the STEM Talent Report is to identify and highlight Illinois' supply of STEM talent, as represented by degree conferrals, as well as demand in the workforce, as represented by trends in the job market.

"The partnership with ISTC is going to allow us to continue down that path of using, connecting, and bettering data," Meg said. "We've done a lot on the traditional institutions and their outcomes, particularly on computer science education at the high school and postsecondary levels. Now ISTC will bring in that innovation and employer component to create a different lens on the educational institutions and what they're bringing to the innovation economy."

When resources are pooled and unique perspectives are shared, data can form the connections that Illinois relies on for continued growth.



data

RESEARCHERS TO KNOW

Recognizing research shaping Illinois' future

Researchers to Know is ISTC's annual recognition of scientists whose work is shaping the future. Each year, outstanding researchers from universities and research institutions across Illinois are selected based on the impact, relevance, and forward-looking nature of their work. The 2025 honorees represent disciplines critical to the state's success and quality of life, including artificial intelligence, biosensing, neuroscience, public health, sustainability, education, and global development.

The 2025 theme, What's Next in Innovation?, reflects on the areas most likely to shape the next decade. The honored research addresses complex challenges facing Illinois communities. These emerging priorities include data-driven decision making, human-centered technology design, resilient health and food systems, climate adaptation, and equitable access.

Looking ahead, the contributions of these researchers illustrate how Illinois is prepared to usher in a future defined by interdisciplinary collaboration and applied impact. Their work connects academic discovery to industry needs, policy considerations, and societal outcomes.

Through Researchers to Know, ISTC elevates the research that's defining what's next for innovation in Illinois. The initiative reinforces the importance of investing in people and ideas that move knowledge into action, ensuring that today's breakthroughs contribute meaningfully to the decade ahead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Research is increasingly interdisciplinary**, crossing traditional boundaries to address complex, real-world challenges.
2. **Applied innovation is accelerating**, with stronger alignment between academic discovery and practical implementation.
3. **Collaboration is expanding** geographically, engaging institutions and partners across Illinois.
4. **Industry engagement is deepening**, with research informing product development, workforce strategy, and economic.
5. **Public impact is central**, as researchers address issues tied to health, sustainability, technology, and community resilience.
6. **Recognition strengthens visibility**, elevating research leaders and reinforcing Illinois as a hub for transformative ideas.
7. **Emerging technologies are advancing rapidly**, signaling Illinois' role in shaping the next decade of innovation.



ENGAGING WITH EARLY EDUCATION

Connecting Curriculum to the Corporate World

BY: **JOZIE CROUCH**

PHOTOGRAPH BY: **ZOE RAIN**

Investment and engagement in education today sets the future workforce up for success tomorrow. ISTC's partners in education help provide an invaluable foundation through leveled-up learning.

CME Group is one such partner. In the 2024-25 school year, they connected with Robert Berg's Intro to AI class at Lane Tech College Prep High School through ISTC's STEM Challenge program. Robert's students worked in teams to address challenges inspired by issues and needs CME Group encounters. "The STEM challenge provides an opportunity for the kids to do something that's real world that they wouldn't necessarily do otherwise," Robert said. "It gives them a good opportunity to see what they can do post high school and how our high school curriculum actually can affect what they do later on in life."

Throughout the project, students received weekly virtual mentorship from CME Group employees who used their own experience to support not only the work but also student development and understanding of the industry.

"I talk to my students all the time about different things they can do later on. But when it comes from somebody who's in the middle of doing those things, it means a lot," Robert said. "Mentors have a different set of experiences that they can impart on those kids than I do as a teacher."

One student in Rob's classroom that benefited from such mentorship is Lane Tech senior, Ali Mostafa. His team was challenged to design an AI market data system capable of analyzing data sets and identifying trends that could aid traders in decision-making. He and his peers worked with two CME professionals, including the 2025 STEM Challenge Mentor of the Year awardee, Nathan Levens.

"Our mentors helped us pick the best path and goal for our project," Ali said. "Initially, we got our problem statement and we really weren't sure where we wanted to take it. Nathan and Seth were instrumental in getting us to focus our attention on the right path and create a real application that would be helpful."

Ali hopes to pursue a career in technology and computer science. The STEM Challenge gave him an early opportunity to actively participate in the software solution development that he's most interested in.



ALI MOSTAFA
2025 STEM Challenge Student

> ***My time during the 2025 STEM Challenge was nothing short of extraordinary. It provided me with an amazing opportunity to spend time doing authentic and meaningful work, developing practical applications, all while gaining deep insights into the tech industry.***

Ali's experience is just one of over a thousand that ISTC supported this year through education programming that bridges the classroom and the real world. As AI and other advancements increase efficiency, it's more important than ever that the workforce comes prepared with tech literacy, adaptability, and flexible problem solving and communication. Early opportunities to build these competencies in a supportive classroom environment ensures that when students begin their careers they're not just keeping pace, but blazing the trails.

education

MENTOR MATCHING ENGINE

Linking classrooms with real-world expertise

In 2025, the Mentor Matching Engine (MME) provided formative educational experiences that break the mold of traditional learning. Through this structured mentorship model, high school learners developed confidence, professional skills, and awareness of the many opportunities awaiting them.

MME facilitated a network of 26 schools, 32 educators, 274 mentors, and 874 students. The long-term, high-engagement model fueled mentor-mentee relationships that provided ongoing communication, feedback, and support.

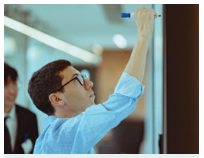
This not only contributed to consistent school interest, but also measurable growth in students.

The defining outcome of 2025 was confidence. Students entered the program unsure of how their ideas would hold up in professional conversations. Over time, they practiced presenting technical solutions, integrating feedback, and navigating real-world expectations. They learned to revise, to defend their thinking, and to communicate with clarity.

These outcomes became visible during the Student Research Showcase, where 30 students presented the research they accomplished with their mentors, reflecting a range of industry themes including engineering, nanotechnology, biology, neuroscience, sociology, and other applied fields, illustrating how students applied their research and technical skills to diverse, real-world challenges.

Operationally, teachers were given greater ownership over project management. Platform enhancements improved accessibility and security, in addition to ISTC expanding internal capacity to strengthen mentor recruitment and engagement. These investments positioned the program for thoughtful expansion without compromising quality.

growth you can measure



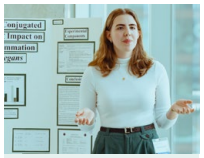
100%

of teachers reported improved student communication, perseverance, and problem-solving skills



97%

of students reported greater confidence in their STEM and research skills



95%

reported increased or sustained interest in pursuing research in the future



81%

worked with an industry professional for the first time



89%

of mentors built a trusting and supportive relationship with their students

These outcomes are the result of expanded access to professional networks, meaningful feedback, and environments where learning is active rather than passive.

why this matters

- Students are building identity alongside technical competence
- Professional networks are becoming more accessible to young people
- Teachers trust industry collaboration as part of instruction
- Mentorship strengthens both student and mentor growth
- The model is positioned for sustainable scale



> *[My mentor] helped me troubleshoot problems and difficult decisions while still letting me take the lead. We had excellent conversations about what it means to pursue a career in research and how to overcome adversity within the field. I am so grateful for having the opportunity to work with such a compassionate, intelligent mentor.*
>
> *- 2025 MME Student*



MME's legacy priorities remain clear: increase access intentionally, protect the depth of mentorship relationships, and ensure that more students across Illinois experience what happens when industry engagement becomes part of everyday learning.

IMPACT BEYOND THE METRICS

1. Students gained direct access to industry professionals and real-time feedback loops.
2. Mentors strengthened coaching and leadership skills through sustained engagement.
3. Educators integrated industry collaboration into structured classroom practice.
4. Trust between schools and professionals deepened across the ecosystem.
5. Mentorship shifted from enrichment to an expected part of applied learning.







> *Our mentors really helped us figure out and understand the real-world application of our STEM Challenge project, which I believe informed how realistic and potentially useful our project became.*
>
> *- 2025 STEM Challenge Student*

STEM CHALLENGE

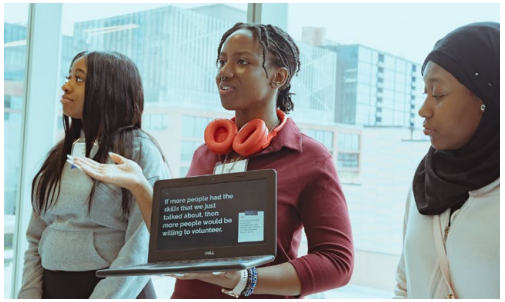
Applying classroom learning to real-world problems

At its core, the STEM Challenge is built on partnership. Companies invest in skills-based volunteering. Educators embed applied challenges into their curriculum. Students engage directly with professionals while tackling complex industry questions. Together, this ecosystem transforms STEM from theory into lived experience.

This year, the STEM Challenge strengthened its role as a structured bridge between Illinois classrooms and industry. By bringing educators, students, and industry professionals into ongoing collaboration, the program continued to demonstrate how project-based problem solving can reshape classroom learning and expand career visibility.

FOR ILLINOIS' FUTURE WORKFORCE, this means

- Students are gaining exposure to career pathways earlier and with greater clarity
- Industry professionals are contributing directly to skill development in local schools
- Classrooms are integrating real-world expectations around teamwork, iteration, and accountability

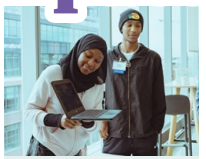


evidence of impact



100%

of teachers reported improved student communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills



94%

of students strengthened their STEM confidence and technical skills



97%

of students maintained or increased their ability to see themselves in a STEM role



80%

of students worked with an industry professional for the first time



98%

of mentors valued that their company provides opportunities for skills-based volunteering

These results signal a growing culture of applied learning across Illinois, where students build professional identity through classroom assignments.

This model also shapes how mentors and educators engage, with mentors reporting strengthened leadership and coaching skills and teachers noting higher levels of student ownership and persistence.

STEM CHALLENGE REINFORCES THREE CRITICAL SHIFTS

1. STEM learning is most powerful when industry insight is embedded, not supplemental.
2. Sustained mentorship builds confidence faster than one-time exposure.
3. Skills-based volunteering benefits companies, educators, and students alike.

The STEM Challenge is evidence that when students see professionals invest in their growth and recognize their potential, STEM goes beyond required curriculum in school and becomes a pathway they can confidently pursue.

SUPPORT OUR PROGRAMS

ISTC is proud of the impact reflected in these results. With your support, students across Illinois can continue gaining access to mentorship, real-world STEM experiences, and pathways that expand what they believe is possible.

Your donations help connect classrooms to industry, strengthen educator capacity, and open doors for young people who may not otherwise have the opportunity to explore their place in science and technology. Together, we can prepare the next generation of innovators.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN SUPPORT TODAY.



TEACHER EXTERNSHIP

Bringing the workplace into the classroom

In the summer of 2025, the Teacher Externship Program strengthened direct connections between Illinois classrooms and STEM workplaces. The program offered public school teachers flexible opportunities for experiential learning at Google and CDK. This expanded how teachers understand and communicate career pathways, workplace expectations, and the competencies students need to succeed beyond graduation.

This year, the program engaged 17 schools, 20 educators, and 20 employee mentors. Teachers shadowed professionals across departments, observed operational workflows, and engaged in ongoing dialogue about how industry teams problem-solve, communicate, and adapt.

the outcomes reflect both clarity and confidence

100% of teachers gained insight into how companies operate, career paths and roles, and STEM opportunities.

100% of teachers reported feeling prepared to bring at least one observed practice back into their classroom

86% of teachers built connections with STEM professionals they plan to contact in the future

These results underscore the program's multiplier effect. When teachers gain industry perspective, that knowledge does not remain isolated to the externship experience. It informs curriculum design, shapes classroom dialogue, and strengthens how educators advise students about postsecondary pathways.



> *I am excited to use this experience in my course and, hopefully, impress upon students that what we do in the classroom may actually have a significant impact on their future performance in the workplace.*
>
> *- 2025 Teacher Externship Participant*

For this cycle, ISTC also invested in program refinement to ensure durability and consistency. Clearer goal alignment, structured activity guides, and a cohesive program lifecycle strengthened the externship model. These enhancements led to a successful participant experience, making the program a sustainable and scalable component of ISTC's education portfolio.

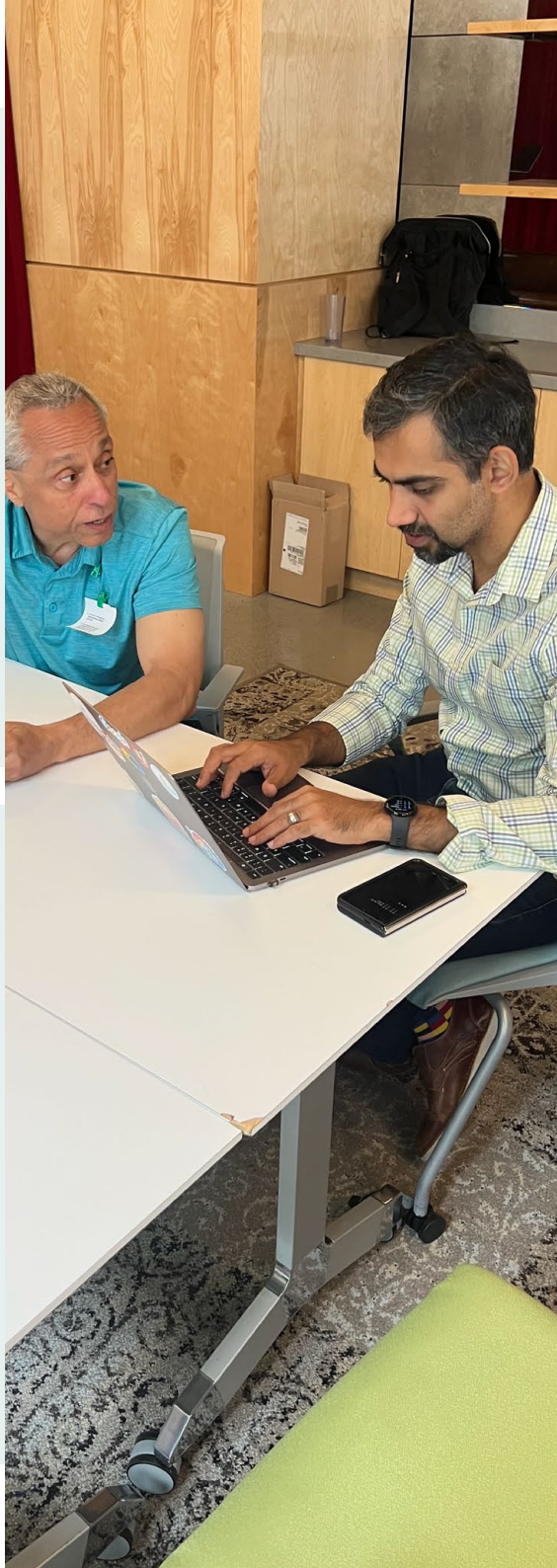
Because each participating educator reaches dozens, and often hundreds, of students annually, the impact of Teacher Externships extends far beyond individual placements. By investing in educators' professional training, the program strengthens classrooms statewide and reinforces the shared responsibility between schools and industry in preparing Illinois' future workforce.

HOW TEACHER EXTERNSHIPS impact classrooms in Illinois

- Instruction becomes more career-connected and industry-informed
- Students gain clearer insight into real-world STEM pathways
- Educators integrate professional norms around collaboration
- Teachers strengthen confidence in advising students about STEM careers
- Educators build professional networks that extend beyond a single school year
- Students are exposed to the skills most valued in today's workforce

HOW TEACHER EXTERNSHIPS impact employee mentors

- Employees deepen their sense of impact and purpose in their roles
- Mentors play an active role in shaping the next generation of STEM talent
- Connections between employees and their local community members are strengthened
- Employees improve their ability to communicate about internal procedures, products, and priorities with external audiences
- Employees report greater pride in their organization for supporting meaningful community impact





education

ADM INTERNSHIP

Creating immersive STEM pathways through industry partnership

ISTC partnered with ADM in 2025 for the second consecutive year to host a five-week paid STEM internship for high school students from Decatur-Eisenhower High School. Hosted at ADM's headquarters in Decatur, the internship provided students with immersive, hands-on exposure to STEM careers through lab-based work, professional mentorship, and project-based learning.

Throughout the internship, students worked alongside more than thirty rotating ADM mentors across multiple teams, gaining insight into a wide range of STEM roles and workplace pathways. The experience culminated in two final projects: a skills-based presentation and a collaborative lab-focused project, both of which allowed students to demonstrate technical learning, professional communication, and confidence in a corporate setting.

The 2025 internship extended the program from four to five weeks, allowing for deeper engagement, stronger relationships, and more meaningful project contributions. Recruiting students from a local high school also ensured alignment with equity and access goals by reducing geographic barriers and building local pathways into STEM education and careers.

With a successful second year completed, the ADM internship now offers a strong foundation for refinement and future growth.

LEADING A LEGACY

Laura Appenzeller's Impact at ISTC

BY: **JOZIE CROUCH**

PHOTGRAPH RESOURCE: **UIUC WEBSITE**

One of the longest-running tenures on the Illinois Science and Technology Coalition's Board of Directors came to a close in 2025. For 12 years, Laura Appenzeller, Executive Director at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's Research Park, used her insight as an innovation hub leader to inform ISTC's efforts as a catalyst, convener, and champion in the ecosystem. Her service in these tandem roles contributed to an organization and a state better prepared to facilitate R&D, partnership between institutions, and economic growth.

Laura's collaboration with ISTC began even before her appointment to the board. "As long as I've been at the University of Illinois, I've been working with ISTC," she said. She first engaged with the coalition in 2009, when ISTC was providing foundational support for the first crop of research parks and incubators that Laura was involved in from a private development angle.

"Looking back, some of those [research parks] that had university ties are still the most stable and thriving today," Laura said. "It's a good reflection on ISTC's composition of university, state, and industry partners coming together to create science and technology infrastructure for Illinois."

At the time of her first board meeting five years later, the landscape still placed emphasis on R&D within established companies and federal labs. "In the early days, there were not as many technology organizations," Laura explained. "In some ways, I think ISTC was an early convener of these entities. The people on our board were building Illinois as a technology hub that was connected through partnerships."

Over the next several years, Laura and ISTC advocated for policy that made participation in R&D and Illinois' innovation ecosystem more accessible. Among the legislation supported were the R&D Tax Credit at the state level and the Illinois Angel Investment Tax Credit Program, both of which still encourage consistent funding for research. Paired with these tax credit programs, ISTC championed Small Business Innovation Research funding and other programs that placed particular emphasis on making Illinois advantageous to small enterprises by better connecting them to the resources and capital needed to thrive.

Among all the work Laura oversaw during her time on the board, she remains especially proud to have been a part of the Illinois Innovation Vouchers program. "We started working on the Innovation Vouchers more than eight years ago," she explained. ISTC crafted the early legislation and gathered support from other champions in order to lay the groundwork for the Vouchers program. Later, during Laura's time as board chair, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity selected ISTC as the program's administering organization.

> *"This one is special to me because this was a way that we could bridge together the small companies throughout the state with new resources that universities could provide. It was a really good marriage of the things that ISTC is good at, and it was neat to see policy be put into action and turn into a real program that we could champion."*



LAURA APPENZELLER
Executive Director
UIUC Research Park

Laura's leadership has contributed to a legacy of powerful advocacy that ISTC intends to build upon every year. "I hope ISTC continues to be a thought leader for the state," she said, "thinking of new policies, initiatives, and industries that will guide our future in Illinois."

advocacy

Advancing innovation through policy and STEM talent development

ISTC stands as a vital force in shaping Illinois' economic future, recognizing that sustained prosperity is intrinsically linked to industry investment and the cultivation of a diverse, future-ready STEM workforce.

ISTC advocates for policies and state funding that foster collaboration between academia, industry, and startups. That includes continued support of increased funding for university research, promoting tax incentives for corporate R&D expenditures, and non-dilutive incentives such as the Illinois Innovation Voucher Program. These efforts are critical for transitioning basic research into marketable technologies and diversifying the state's economic base beyond traditional sectors. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: R&D investment attracts top-tier talent, which in turn fuels further innovation and economic output.

The success of this cycle is contingent upon a steady supply of skilled professionals. Recognizing this, a significant pillar of ISTC's mission is the strategic development of teacher and talent pipelines for the future STEM workforce. The challenge is multifaceted, requiring intervention at multiple educational levels, from K-12 through post-secondary education as well as considerations for reskilling and upskilling as applied core competencies continue to shift with technological advancements. ISTC is committed to informing new policies and programming that effectively bridge the gap between educational outputs and industry needs.

A key area of focus is supporting our teachers, who are the shepherds within any career pathway. High-quality STEM education requires educators who are knowledgeable, well-resourced, and connected to real industry applications. To meet this need, ISTC has deployed a teacher externship program designed for teachers to gain relevant industry experience. To both complement and expand that effort, ISTC is increasingly finding opportunities to advocate for policies that enhance teacher professional development and provide credentialing for STEM-specific training. This investment in teachers offers a return in the form of student success.

Broadening student access and interest in STEM careers not only helps to meet a market demand, but it offers an opportunity to shape a more equitable workforce. This includes promoting initiatives that put schools into contact with industry mentors and promoting STEM education for all students. By focusing on inclusivity, ISTC seeks to ensure that the future STEM workforce reflects the diversity of Illinois, addressing persistent equity gaps in high-growth sectors.

ISTC prioritizes data-driven decision-making. For over a decade, the Illinois Innovation Index has offered stakeholders the metrics necessary to track progress and inform policy. This annual, three-part report series has been instrumental in prioritizing ISTC's internal programming and our recommendations for ecosystem partners. We plan to expand these reports in the coming year to provide actionable insights on R&D activity, STEM talent and workforce development, and university entrepreneurship in Illinois.

We remain dedicated to a mission of idea to impact, which calls for accelerating innovation and cultivating the STEM talent necessary for sustained economic growth across the state. With the support of our partners, the extended reach of our programs and the volume of our collective voice helps to put advocacy in action and position Illinois as an innovation champion.











FUNDRAISING & COMMUNITY

2025 set our fundraising goals in motion! Thanks to the collective support of our donor community, we were able to continue to offer scholarships to school partners and evolve our programs, ensuring a lasting impact on workforce readiness and STEM education across Illinois.

Helen Abad
Nikhil AM
Bobby Apitz
Noor Bhagwagar
Somya Bhagwagar
Marnie Boyd
Jim Bray
Lucy Brennan
Darren Brown
Jonathan Brown
Kate Brownson
Maya Chan Morales
Katherine Clow
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Barb Wisniewski
Elisabeth Wright
Sara Young
Ava Zandieh
Lina Zayed

LEADERSHIP & STAFF

Board of Directors

ISTC's Board of Directors provides strategic leadership, guiding our mission to drive innovation, collaboration, and economic growth in Illinois. Their expertise and dedication ensure that ISTC continues to create opportunities for businesses, researchers, and entrepreneurs statewide.

Laura Appenzeller
University of Illinois

Jim Bray
Northwestern University

Joe Cassidy
College of DuPage

Jess Goode
Illinois Institute of Technology

Bob Greenlee
Tusk Strategies

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Intentional Gravity

Patrick Thomas
Milwaukee Tool

Somali Tomczak
NICOR

Colleen Wright
Constellation Energy

> Laura Appenzeller & Kumar Natesaiyer retired from the Board in 2025. Their thoughtful leadership and expertise will be missed, and we extend them both a heartfelt thank you for their service. Throughout their tenure, they provided steady guidance, strategic insight, and a deep commitment to advancing ISTC's mission and strengthening Illinois' innovation ecosystem.

Ambassador Members

Somya Bhagwagar
CME Group

Lucy Brennan
P33

Kate Brownson
The Baxter Center for Science Education

Yujia Ding
Dallas College

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Kelly Almousily
Senior Manager, Events and Partnerships



Tanvi Dharap
Senior Program Manager, Mentorship



Valentina Pulla
Communications Manager, Program Strategies & Analytics



Colleen Falconer
Education Program Associate

notes of gratitude for staff who transitioned in 2025

> We extend our deepest gratitude to Becky Goldberg for her six years of dedicated service to the Illinois Science & Technology Coalition. Becky's leadership strengthened our Education programs and advanced student-centered innovation across the state. Her passion for expanding access to STEM, elevating student voice, and building meaningful partnerships shaped lasting opportunities for young people and educators alike. We are grateful for her commitment, care, and impact, and we wish her continued success in her next chapter.

> We also extend our appreciation to all staff members who contributed to our mission in 2025, including Austin Green, Briana Wilson, and Blaise Stephens, who transitioned from the organization this year, as well as our 2025 interns, Shravan Hari and Parin Sensenbrenner. We are grateful for their time and contributions and wish them the best ahead.

SUPPORTER RECOGNITION

MEMBERS & PARTNERS

Recognizing Those Who Strengthen Our Innovation Ecosystem

We extend our sincere gratitude to our members and partners for their continued collaboration and commitment to innovation across Illinois. Your support strengthens our research, entrepreneurship, and STEM ecosystems, driving meaningful impact in communities statewide.

By working alongside industry leaders, educators, researchers, and entrepreneurs, we strengthen the ties between classrooms, companies, and communities. Across our programs, collaboration fuels mentorship, advances applied research, and expands access to opportunity, creating a more connected, resilient innovation ecosystem at every level.

Together, we are not only supporting individual initiatives, but advancing a statewide network where talent, ideas, and partnership power lasting progress.

ADM

Baxter International Foundation

Bradley University

Caterpillar

CME Group

College of DuPage

Constellation

Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity
JB Pritzker, Governor

Illinois Tech

imc

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Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative

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Northern Illinois University

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Venture Collaborative

Tusk Strategies

The University of Chicago

UL Research Institutes | Research Experiences & Education

University of Illinois System

USG



Be part of what's moving Illinois forward

Follow us and stay connected to the people, ideas, and partnerships shaping our innovation ecosystem

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