



Why it is so Important, and so Difficult, to Prepare the Emerging Workforce

The Imperative

Endowing the next generation – our emerging workforce - with the skills needed to meet ever-changing personal, economic and social challenges is every community's most important shared responsibility.

Young people entering high school today will face unprecedented challenges and opportunities in their lifetimes. In a few years, today's fourteen-year-olds will be adults responsible for finding affordable alternative fuels, negotiating unique forms of cooperation between the private and public sectors, developing cures to intractable diseases, creating new modes of artistic expression, preserving nonrenewable natural resources, teaching the next generation of learners, caring for the still-aging-gracefully Baby Boomers, and resolving world conflicts.

To meet these challenges and take advantage of these opportunities, young people will need the skills and knowledge that power nearly every workplace today – clear and convincing communication, creative problem solving, collaborative teamwork.. They will also need specialized training in industries and occupations that are emerging before our eyes such as

biotechnologies, cyber security, healthcare informatics, and clean energy development. All these skills, general and specific, are increasingly complex and continually evolving.

Developing an emerging workforce with this complexity and level of skills will require high schools, technical programs, and colleges to challenge young people with relevant and rigorous curricula. Students will need to excel in these courses of study and be prepared to return for additional training throughout their lifetimes. They will also need experiences outside of the classroom that provide high-quality, hands-on, and guided opportunities to develop interpersonal, critical thinking, and professional skills. These skills are difficult to master in theory and require practical experiences to develop.

“To remain globally competitive, employers need a talent pipeline that is filled with young people who have a broad range of skills, including many applied skills that may be more easily developed beyond the traditional education system.”

Tomorrow’s Workforce: Ready or Not, It’s a Choice the Business Community Must Make Now
Corporate Voices for Working Families, July 2008

When young people develop these essential skills and the enthusiasm to succeed, the personal and collective impact is tangible and immense. High-quality investments in preparing young people for work result in a deep bench of talented, inventive, and motivated employees; increased revenue for communities, states, and the nation; reduced poverty rates; and innovation that fuels economic growth and

develops solutions to intractable problems. Individuals and families also prosper when young people have opportunities to learn skills for twenty-first century jobs. School and early work successes are linked to higher work-life income, employment stability, personal wealth, and even health and longevity. Benefits at all levels can endure for generations.

Table 1: Benefits of Preparing the Emerging Workforce

| | Employers | Communities | Individuals |
|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| <i>Direct Benefits</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased productivity and quality of work ▪ Lower costs for training new employees ▪ Lower costs relating to employee turnover and hiring | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased tax revenue ▪ Lower costs for social, employment, and health programs ▪ Lower rates of crime and costs for criminal justice system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased earnings and personal wealth over a lifetime ▪ Lower debt levels from incomplete educational attempts |
| <i>Indirect Benefits</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased capacity to develop new products, services, or technologies ▪ Positive public image as a forward-thinking company | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased opportunities to attract high-wage jobs ▪ Higher rate of economic growth ▪ Net increases to community’s overall economic health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased opportunities to attract high-wage jobs ▪ Increased opportunities for career advancement ▪ Improved health and longevity ▪ Positive impact on educational and economic wellbeing of children |

The nation's schools, communities, and families struggle to prepare the emerging workforce.

Despite these compelling incentives to prepare the emerging workforce, many young people struggle as they transition into adult work and life. Many students do not have the basic skills needed to succeed in college, lack essential interpersonal or problem solving skills, and will become adults unprepared for the twenty-first century workforce. Most have high ambitions - **more than 78% expect to earn a four-year college degree or higher**¹. However, many will not succeed. Of the 4.125 million² young people in America who will start public high school this September:

69% will enter high school reading at or below basic level

Two thirds of American eighth graders attending public schools read at less than proficient levels.³ Employers in the twenty-five industries most on track for growth indicate they require higher than average reading ability in their workplaces and that forty percent of recent graduates lack the literacy skills they need.⁴ With or without a diploma, many youth and young adults are struggling with fundamental levels of literacy. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy reports 43% of the United States population age 16 years or older have basic or below basic levels of literacy. For these ninety-three million adults, identifying a specific location on a map or calculating the cost of ordering supplies from a catalog would be difficult.⁵

25% will not graduate high school

Of 9th graders who started high school in 2002, 73.2% graduated from high school on time.⁶ In low socioeconomic communities, an estimated one half of

youth who begin the ninth grade will not graduate four years later.⁷

Nearly 50% of high school graduates will have no hands-on training in workplace skills

Many high school students will not work as an intern, apprentice, or part-time employee, missing the opportunity to develop critical employability skills.⁸ In a national survey, employers indicated over half of recent high school graduates have major gaps in their critical thinking, problem solving, and written communication skills and forty percent lack professionalism, work ethic, and teamwork, collaboration, and oral communication skills.⁹ Guided, hands-on experiences provide critical opportunities to learn these skills.

Of high school graduates who go to college, 25% will not make it past their first year of college.¹⁰

Students who make it to college are too often overwhelmed academically or financially. Only twenty-four percent of college-bound high school seniors meet all four measures for academic readiness, as tested by the ACT.¹¹ Fifty-four percent of students surveyed by Public Agenda reported they left college because they could not balance the demands of classes and the job they needed to pay for school.¹²

16% will be “disconnected” before they become adults.

Approximately 5.2 million 16- through 24-year-olds are not in school and not working at any point in time.¹³

The time to reverse these trends is now.

A “perfect storm” of educational and economic realities makes urgent the need to reverse these trends now: the percentage of young workers who are at higher risk for educational and social disadvantages is increasing; as Baby Boomers retire, there will be an inadequate number of young workers entering the labor force; and young workers have fewer opportunities to develop workplace essential skills. **Each emerging worker is needed but too many will not be ready.**

Two concurrent demographic shifts highlight the need to prepare *all* young people for the workforce: the population is becoming increasingly diverse and significantly older. Fifty percent of the population in the United States will be Latino, African-American, or Asian by 2050 according to Census predictions.¹⁴ However, the disparities in educational attainment and workforce participation rates between racial and ethnic groups indicate the **fastest-growing segments of the population are most at-risk for falling behind.**

As the population of older Americans increases, the number of young people in the labor force will not meet demand. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates “youths - those between the ages of 16 and 24 - will decline in numbers and will see their share of the labor force fall from 14.8 to 12.7%.”¹⁵ Although Boomers are currently working longer than previous generations, **once the eldest cohort does exit the workforce, there will be a rush to meet the gaping holes that they will leave behind.**¹⁶ Businesses and governments are growing increasingly worried about their

ability to identify qualified workers to replace them.

Today’s economic environment further puts the nation’s youth at risk of entering adulthood without needed skills for work and life. The current recession has severely limited employment opportunities for the nation’s young adults. In August 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an unemployment rate for youth of 19.1%, the highest on record. This represents 4.4 million youth who sought work but remained unemployed.¹⁷ When underemployed, mal-employed and discouraged job seekers are included, the number of young people unable to find work may be more than twice this number.¹⁸ Overall, high unemployment rates disproportionately affect youth and young adults. 45.6% of the unemployed were young people, the highest rate since this information was first tracked.¹⁹

Lost work experiences during youth foster disconnection from the workforce and depressed wages for workers over time.²⁰ Data indicate individuals with jobs at 16 and 17 years of age were more likely to be employed at age 30 and more likely to have completed some college.²¹ These jobs likely gave workers an opportunity to try out different occupations and types of employers, to earn money for college and to develop workplace success skills. This challenging economic environment makes it difficult to provide opportunities for young people to earn money for college and gain essential skills.

States and communities must grapple with this “perfect storm” of economic and

demographic conditions that put at risk the success of the emerging workforce. Innovative and coordinated efforts *can*

help young people gain education credentials, learn workplace skills and overcome childhood hardships.

The implications of under-preparing young people for college and career should be of nation-wide concern. “Because human development is cumulative, missed opportunities to invest in and prepare this generation will be extremely costly to reverse, both for young people and for society”.

World Development Report 2007, pg 26

The Challenges

The benefits of helping all youth succeed in work and life are clear and compelling. Schools, communities, and families each search for the best ways to help young people prepare for the future however, several broad challenges complicate an already complex process. Three of these challenges highlight the need to develop a community-wide workforce preparation network.

Challenge #1: Schools too often operate in isolation.

Twenty-first century secondary and postsecondary schools must reach for levels of effectiveness that are unmatched in our history. Public high schools, in particular, are struggling to meet the challenge. They are tasked with teaching a range of increasingly complex academic skills, reinforcing the development of workplace skills such as time management, critical thinking, teamwork and problem solving and, for a small number of students, providing occupation specific skills.

Unfortunately, high schools often don't tap into community resources that can help prepare young people for future challenges and opportunities. Rather than teaching *all* these skills alone, high schools could partner with employers and community-based programs to develop opportunities for students to practice essential skills outside the classroom – particularly workplace and job specific skills. Afterschool and summer activities can provide high-quality, guided and hands-on learning experiences that support classroom curricula while also giving youth opportunities to develop practical work-related skills.

Despite the apparent need to learn these skills, there are only a few statewide standards, curricula, or school-based programs that focus on work-related skills. Current educational policies value academic accountability but traditional assessments poorly measure these skills. Schools struggle to find curricular time or instructional methods for teaching these skills that are most effectively taught in context rather than a classroom. In isolation, schools do not have the capacity to teach essential workplace skills.

High quality activities that promote workforce preparation including apprenticeship training, community volunteering, adult mentoring, leadership development, internships and co-ops, career academies and others can fill this gap for schools and their students. Created through partnerships with community organizations and employers, these activities help schools make learning more relevant, retain students who struggle in traditional classrooms, access state of the art equipment and technologies, and keep up with emerging trends that will impact the future workforce. Ultimately, when schools work with employers and the community, they make it possible for all students to succeed, regardless of career goal or academic achievement.

Challenge #2: Programs for older youth and young adults are not widely available.

Community organizations and public agencies often create programs that fill gaps between what schools can provide and what younger children need. Afterschool and

summer recreation programs, tutoring programs, and enrichment activities in the arts or culture are available in community centers, houses of worship, and nonprofit organizations across the nation. These programs help children build a strong foundation of “internal and external developmental assets”.²²

However, these programs often do not fill the needs of older youth and young adults who should be engaged in activities that focus on college and career readiness, particularly if they are not standing on a strong foundation of assets from childhood. At this stage, young people need programs that provide teamwork and other workplace learning skills, tutoring for credit recovery or college admissions exams, career exploration and leadership development opportunities, summer and afterschool jobs, volunteer experiences, and financial literacy skills. Young people, whose high school counselors advise an average of 467 students each,²³ need guidance through college application and job search processes. Youth and their parents need help wading through the deluge of information on career options to identify and prepare for the fields of the future that are a true fit. And young people need to know how to graduate from higher education with high-demand, living-wage skills but without overwhelming debt. (See *Appendix B: Strategies and Services* for a list of these activities.)

Workforce preparation programs can be extraordinarily valuable individually and collectively they can change a generation. Students who participate in work-based learning, for instance, experience higher completion rates in related coursework, improved attendance, and higher graduation rates.²⁴ **However, the availability, scope and impact of community-based workforce preparation programs are limited.** The issues vary by community, but

some of the reasons for poor availability and quality are ubiquitous. Programs designed for older youth frequently use outdated approaches more appropriate for younger youth. They struggle to find effective ways to recruit young people or to develop programming that keeps them actively engaged.

National priorities, which communities often mirror, have not focused on youth and young adults. Currently, no federal program focuses on afterschool programs for the nearly 12 million youth in grades sixth through twelve.²⁵ And many private or corporate foundations lean toward programs for specific populations, leaving out many youth who need high-quality opportunities to develop marketable skills that schools can not provide.²⁶

Challenge #3: Existing programs and services are fragmented.

Today, families, educational institutions, afterschool programs, industry employers, community organizations, workforce and economic development agencies, and public and private funders, share the responsibility of preparing young people for the future. Working together, this diverse group of stakeholders has the capacity to prepare a world-class emerging workforce.²⁷ These systems and programs, however, often do not work together. Parents, schools, and community programs only occasionally come together to identify and close skill gaps for individual students; business and professional groups seldom work with educational institutions to ensure they are teaching relevant skills; and community organizations and government agencies rarely focus on common goals for their youth and young adult populations.

The current grant funding process contributes considerably to fragmentation between related entities. Community and educational entities must compete for limited and shifting resources, to form weak partnerships with short term goals, and to sacrifice quality and growth opportunities to meet the narrow goals of funders. This process is intended to phase out ineffective programs and promote the development of quality efforts. In practice, many resources are wasted on the start and stop of programs that ultimately serve only a small portion of the youth in need.

Competition for resources and lack of collaboration between workforce preparation stakeholders perpetuates wastefulness and gaps in services. As a result, many youth miss out on valuable learning experiences and lack the skills widely needed to succeed in most careers. Improving cooperation and cross-integration of programs between all community stakeholders would conserve resources, simplify processes, and build a common and logical set of measurable outcomes benefiting all youth.

Preparing an emerging workforce requires a comprehensive set of programs and activities for all youth, including the youth who are out-of-school, struggling to overcome personal obstacles or are without the financial means to attend higher education. The only way to ensure this is to provide in-depth workforce preparations opportunities through numerous community providers working in concert.

For more information on the Initiative, contact Elizabeth Senn-Alvey at:

Emerging Workforce Initiative, Inc.
www.emergingworkforce.org
esennalvey@emergingworkforce.org
502.310.1172

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