

School-to-Work Impact in Georgia Schools Career Awareness and Exploration in Elementary and Middle Grades

Findings from the Georgia School-To-Work Project

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This is one in a series of briefs addressing the statewide findings of a two-year study of the implementation and impact of School-to-Work in Georgia. Beginning with an overview of the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act and best practices in career awareness, this brief describes Georgia's School-to-Work (STW) initiatives and some details about what local STW Partnerships are doing to increase career awareness among employers, teachers, parents, and students in the elementary and middle grades.

Overview of School-to-Work

The federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act was enacted in 1994 to create coherent systems that link *school-based learning* characterized by career awareness and exploration, high academic standards, and career majors to *work-based learning* including planned programs of work experience, workplace mentoring, and programs of study that lead to industry recognized credentials. These two types of learning were to be linked through *connecting activities* such as drawing on trained professionals at school and work sites to counsel and work with students and employers, assisting with job placement, and linking students with other community services and continuing education. Activities are to begin not later than the 7th grade, continue through high school, and culminate in postsecondary training or education and, ultimately, in productive employment. However, beyond these initial specifications, the Act gave a great deal of flexibility to the states and to the localities about how to actually implement, govern, program, and assess the impact of such a system or systems. The Act did specifically mention that the school-based learning component include career awareness and career exploration and counseling.

National Studies of Career Awareness

A comprehensive review of research at the national, state, and district levels indicates that School-to-Work (STW) activities that involve partnerships between business and education do make a difference for students. Through participation in STW, students develop work-related skills, begin to consider a variety of careers, and plan for a future that is broadened to include college and other post-secondary choices.

National research indicates that best practices in the area of career awareness include:

Career Awareness Best Practices

- Integrated curriculum
- Mentoring
- Service learning
- Contextualized learning
- Career exploration
- Community-based learning
- Employers as teachers
- One-time events, such as career days and field trips to work sites
- Work experience programs

Elementary Schools and Students

The School-to-Work philosophy encourages a comprehensive approach to learning that gives younger students the solid foundation they need to make informed educational and career choices when they are older. In the elementary grades, school-to-work activities are often based on real-world examples.

Several successful strategies used to expand the career awareness of elementary students are career talks from community members (including parents), career fair days, field trips to local businesses and industries, curriculum units, and career themes incorporated into daily lessons. Two of the most common practices for connecting school with work at the elementary school level are integrating the curriculum across subject areas and establishing partnerships with business and the community.

According to national research, characteristics that are common to all best practices at this school level include:

- school-community partnerships,
- curriculum restructuring,
- integration of academic and career concepts, and
- instructional practices and curriculum that reflect contextual and collaborative teaching and learning.

Middle/Junior High Schools and Students

In the middle grades, school-to-work activities often use "real-world" information and projects to augment academic instruction. Teachers and guidance counselors use these activities to introduce students to the connections between what they study in school and the kinds of careers that may be available to them in later

years. Students have opportunities to participate in a variety of career exploration activities that are created to provide some exposure to career options. Such activities include:

- career self-exploration by students, such as using career resource centers and computer software;
- teacher- or counselor-facilitated exploration, such as administering a career interest test and discussing the results with students;
- structured exploration, such as creating individual learning plans for students that include career-related electives, career exploratories, mentoring, etc.

A growing body of research demonstrates the value of five instructional approaches that all use real-world examples to enhance the curriculum, motivate students, and help students effectively transfer learning to other contexts. Some of the best practices currently employed in middle grades career exploration align closely with these approaches:

1. integrating the curriculum with real-world examples and career education topics,
2. using an inquiry-based learning approach that requires students to seek answers to their own questions and actively integrate the new information into their current knowledge base (constructivism),
3. having adults mentor students,
4. engaging students in community service learning, and
5. having students participate in hands-on, real-world experiences for the purpose of applying the information and skills acquired in the classroom to actual settings (contextualized learning).

Professional Development

Effective practices in School-to-Work sites across the nation emphasize the importance of professional development for teachers. STW transition environments are much more complex than traditional educational settings and require a new approach to integrate school-based learning and work-based learning. Therefore, educators in general and teachers in particular must be provided with opportunities to gain STW-related knowledge, instructional expertise, and the associated attitudes needed to collaborate in effective ways with employers and the community. For professional development to have a meaningful impact on teachers and their students, it must be both comprehensive and long term. It must also prepare both career and technical and academic teachers for their involvement in school-to-work transitions.

The Georgia School-to-Work Initiative

In Georgia, interagency planners developed a three-fold vision for School-to-Work:

1. fill gaps and strengthen, expand, and connect the many successful school and community initiatives already in place;
2. enable local partnerships to develop strategies that meet their unique needs and are appropriate in local contexts; and
3. establish an interagency support infra-structure to connect schools, students, families, employers, and other community partners with existing work-related initiatives, programs, and information about successful practice.

As the 41 local School-to-Work Partnerships across Georgia began to plan programs and activities around locally-identified needs, four broad areas of focus for School-to-Work emerged statewide:

1. increase career awareness,
2. expand employer involvement in education,
3. strengthen student achievement, and
4. build systems that are supportive of youth and economic development.

Participation in Career Awareness and Exploration

There are approximately 2,325 K-12 schools in Georgia. By the second year of School-to-Work implementation (school year 2002-2003), at least two-thirds of Georgia's schools were served within local School-to-Work Partnership service areas. Across the state, this translates into:

- 60 percent (or 799) of the 1,332 elementary schools
- 87 percent (or 391) of the 449 middle/junior high schools, and
- 93 percent (or 347) of the 373 high schools.

Each of the 41 local School-to-Work Partnerships in Georgia has implemented one or more work plan objectives aimed at increasing career awareness in the broadest sense. The term, *career awareness*, as used in the Georgia School-to-Work Initiative encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and experiences intended to increase career awareness for students, parents, educators, and other community members.

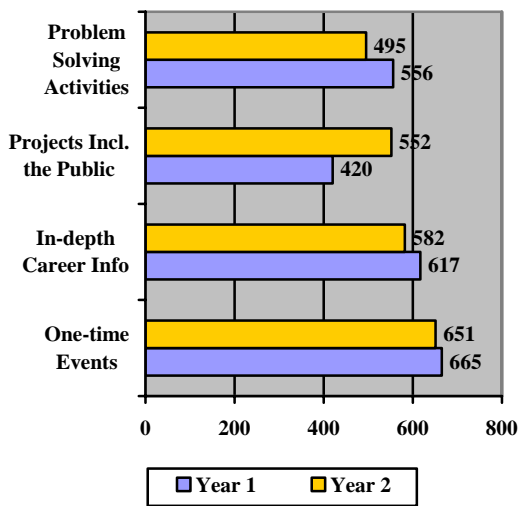
Georgia Elementary Schools

The number of participating elementary schools increased from 764 in Year One to 799 (out of a possible 1,332) in Year Two. Career awareness activities at this school level include one-day, one-time activities, such as viewing videos about careers, participating in field trips, and hearing from guest speakers. Such activities also include longer-term academic programs where students draw upon work- or community-based resources to complete projects or solve "real world" problems. See Figure 1 for school participation in particular types of career awareness activities at 60 percent of Georgia's elementary schools.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of elementary schools participating in projects that include the public (employers, workers, parents) increased from 55 percent in Year One to 68 percent in Year Two. Such projects include planning and/or providing career awareness information, materials, or experiences to students. Elementary school participation in all other surveyed career awareness activities appears to have declined from Year One to Year Two. The reasons for these declines are unknown.



Figure 1. Georgia Elementary School Participation In Career Awareness Activities

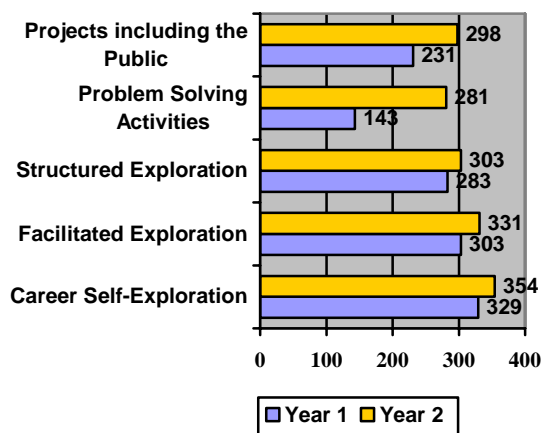


Georgia Middle/Junior High Schools

The number of middle/junior high schools participating in School-to-Work increased from 330 to 391 (out of a possible 449) by the second year of implementation. Career awareness activities at this school level include career self-exploration (e.g., accessing career-related publications or software describing careers); teacher- or counselor-facilitated exploration (e.g., lessons with career awareness themes); and structured exploration (e.g., working with teachers/parents to create an individualized learning plan and participating in activities such as job shadowing or mentoring). See Figure 2 for school participation in particular types of career awareness activities at 87 percent of the middle/junior high schools in Georgia.

The number of middle/junior high schools providing problem-solving activities that draw upon work-based, community or service learning context nearly doubled from 143 schools in Year One to 281 in Year Two, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Georgia Middle/Junior High Schools Participation In Career Exploration Activities



As was true for the elementary schools, there was also an increase in the number of middle/junior high schools participating in projects that include the public (employers, workers, parents)—from 70 percent in Year One to 77 percent in Year Two. Such projects include planning and/or providing career awareness information, materials, or experiences to students.

Effective Practices

Career Planning Activities

CHOICES and other career planning programs have been highly effective. The Partnerships are using these and other specific programs and activities to increase career awareness by placing business leaders in the schools to interact with educators and students and to talk with students about careers. Involving business leaders in the school has given them new insight into the schools as well as given them opportunities to provide more direct input into the educational process.

Professional Development

Making Georgia educators aware of career options is particularly successful when it involves employer participation or concentrates on career education topics. Professional development programs of particular value are those that allow educators to:

- participate in worksite visits or tours,
- be paired with an employee in a work setting for all or part of one day (job shadowing),
- complete an extended internship or externship in a workplace actually working on tasks or projects for the host industry, and/or
- conduct individual field interviews with industry employees or managers about career related topics.

Targeted lesson plans that include projects and real-world activities from local businesses are usually produced to enrich the curriculum.

Technical College Orientation and Tours

Partnerships have increasingly turned to technical college tours and orientations to promote career awareness. This strategy is used to target specific audiences, such as middle/junior high school students or high school juniors or seniors, guidance counselors, administrators, and other school staff to expose them to programs, careers, and resources that are available at the technical colleges. Some Partnerships have also targeted parents for these tours to broaden their perspective about the range of careers that are available and the type of education the technical colleges can provide.

Real-World Examples; One-Time, Short-Term Activities

One-time, short-term activities such as career fairs and job-shadowing, including the popular Groundhog Shadow Day, are also an effective way to promote career awareness. Some of the most positive feedback that the Partnerships receive comes from participants in short-term or one-time events.

Demonstration Grant Awards

Demonstration grants were awarded to 19 Partnerships to develop best practices in Georgia School-to-Work communities. Two of these demonstration projects had a strong career awareness/career development component targeted at the elementary/middle grades levels:

- *Career Counseling—Coastal Georgia Workforce Development Partnership:* Designed to be held at local business sites, this half-day workshop provides middle and high school counselors with current labor market information that focuses on technical jobs, job

demand, and job requirements as they relate to school skills development.

- *If I Had a Hammer*—Valdosta Area School-to-Work Partnership: Provides 4th, 5th, and 6th graders with hands-on learning activities by combining classroom concepts (math, English, science, social studies, art, and physical education) with real-world activities in the construction of a small, pre-fabricated house.

Learn more about these projects at the ORG website: <http://www.coe.uga.edu/ORG/research/demogrant.pdf>

Overcoming Barriers to Career Awareness Activities

The time constraints of full school schedules and coordinating activities with school personnel and business volunteers were among the greatest challenges to implementing career awareness activities. Misconceptions/negative perceptions about technical/career education and careers that require less than a four-year degree comprised another common barrier. These negative mindsets toward career/technical education were found among students, parents, educators, and business people. Additional challenges included a lack of involvement in education on the part of both business and parents and trying to work with counselors overloaded by demands. An emerging issue was a need in the growing international community for communication strategies to overcome language barriers, including additional language support and advisory support.

Most partnerships (81 percent) reported during Year Two that they were making progress in overcoming these barriers, using the following approaches.

Time constraints

- Persistence
- Flexible scheduling
- Coordination with other scheduled events

Negative mindset about technical/career education

- Providing opportunities for educators, business people, and parents to collaborate on school system priorities that focus on technical/career education
- Involving parents in program of study decisions
- Including parents in tours of local technical colleges
- Providing professional development for educators about technical/career education
- Having business community members make classroom presentations to students

Demands on counselors

- Supplementing counselors' efforts by providing opportunities for teachers to incorporate career awareness topics into the curriculum.
- Providing software resources such as ARTIFACTS to help with technical college identification

Lack of business involvement

- Actively participating in key business organizations, such as chambers of commerce
- Holding short, objectives-based meetings with employers

Lack of parental involvement

- Tours of high schools, colleges, and technical colleges
- Invitations to career fairs
- Upgrading career/technical programs
- Offering open houses
- Having 8th grade parents' nights
- Attending weekend parent workshops
- Scheduling meetings with parents and guardians

Sustainability

The over-arching goal of the Georgia School-to-Work initiative has been to achieve systemic and sustainable improvements in local education and workforce development. In just two years of full implementation, most local Partnerships have been able to leverage resources in their communities to ensure that many of the projects they have begun will be continued in the absence of federal School-to-Work funds. Many of the professional development activities, such as teacher orientations and contextual teaching workshops, will be continued because School-to-Work Partnerships have helped them become part of schools' regular professional development offerings or because continued funding has been secured from other partners. In some cases, funding and support for these professional development programs have been promised by employers or community agencies.

Programs related to career awareness and the provision of career information materials, career interest inventories, and the Georgia Career Information System will be continued by the schools or the Partnerships, themselves. Many of the CHOICES-type career planning programs also will be continued. Family Connection Partnerships, local Departments of Labor, and local business and industry are examples of entities that have made funding commitments or expressed support for continuing CHOICES-type programs.

Community collaboratives have seen the worth of job shadowing activities and have signed on as continuing partners. Educators say because of Groundhog Shadow Day, they have developed ties with business that they wish to continue. Career fairs and career days also will be continued because they have become a vital part of school activities and provide a viable avenue for business participation. Involving business leaders in the schools has given them new insight into the schools as well as given them opportunities to provide more direct input into the educational process.

Seed money from the federal School-to-Work initiative has indeed given Georgia communities a boost in increasing career awareness among students, parents, educators, business people, and the community at large. Local School-to-Work Partnerships in their role as neutral intermediaries have been able to bring business, education, and other community groups to the table and encourage everyone to share vital resources for the overall betterment of their communities.

Further Information

This research brief has been prepared by the Occupational Research Group at the University of Georgia under contract with the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education, Office of School-to-Work. The content in this brief has been extracted from *Assessment of Progress in Georgia School-to-Work*, by Richard L. Lynch, Dorothy Harnish, Gail Fletcher, and Jana Thompson [www.coe.uga.edu/ORG], October, 2003. Data and information were obtained from 41 local School-to-Work Partnerships operating across Georgia. Further information about STW in Georgia may be obtained at www.dtae.org/gastw.

