

School-to-Work Impact in Georgia Schools Employer Interviews

Findings from the Georgia School-To-Work Project

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“In the end, having teachers participate in the workplace ultimately makes students more aware of jobs and careers that are available locally.... Most students do not really know what a lot of industries do. [Teacher participation in the workplace] helps bring business into the world of students.”

(Employer interviewee from NW Georgia)

Overview of the Study

Congruent with its vision and purposes, the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 was designed to foster the relationship between business and the schools by promoting the participation of business persons in school reform, curriculum development, and in helping schools provide programs that prepare youth for jobs. Through closer relationships with business, subjects taught in school can become more relevant to what is needed in the current and future workplace, providing more high school graduates with the essential skills necessary to earn a living wage and to attain the preparation needed to pursue postsecondary education.

As members of the 41 local School-to-Work Partnerships in Georgia began to plan programs and activities around locally identified needs, they observed that many educators lack work experience outside an educational setting. Members felt it is critical for educators to be familiar with current workplaces and jobs—particularly those available in their local communities. For without an understanding of the workplace outside of the educational arena, it is difficult to create authentic learning experiences for students that can connect school and work. As a result, expanding employer participation in the education process emerged as an important area of focus for local School-to-Work Partnerships in Georgia.

In the interest of enhancing employer participation, the Georgia School-to-Work Office contracted with the University of Georgia Occupational Research Group to conduct a study to explore how to increase employer involvement in education. The study consisted of interviews conducted during the spring of 2004 with 21 business representatives

from 11 local STW Partnerships identified as having exceptional participation in education activities. A broad variety of types and sizes of businesses and industries across the state of Georgia were represented in this study.

Findings from Employer Interviews

Reasons for Education Involvement

Most of the reasons given by employers for participating in education tended to fall within one or more of three categories:

- Influence the preparedness and quality of the future workforce;
- Participate in and support public education because it is important to the overall success of the community; and
- Increase local interest in the jobs available in a particular industry or company.

Type and Level of Involvement

According to employer participants, it is *direct* involvement in the education process that keeps employers at the table. Examples include opportunities to:

- Interact directly with students
- Provide expert advice through advisory committees or the development of curricula or skill standards; and
- Collaborate on education issues of joint interest to the business and education communities

Once involved in education programs and activities, employers' interests broaden and they tend to become involved in multiple activities as time allows. They are likely to participate across several levels of education, including postsecondary. (See p.4 for examples provided by interviewees of their companies' involvement with education.)

“It is essential that business support education and encourage students to take school seriously for the sake of the community. There are a lot of people who really want to make a difference. And the only way you can make a difference is if you do get involved.”

(Employer interviewee from SE Georgia)

“There have been such technological advances recently—electronic transfer of information has become so commonplace. This has forced educators to change and they will have to continue to do so to keep up with new advances. Maybe this is one of the reasons there is an interest among teachers in contextual learning—our STW Partnership funded a seminar on this and over 200 teachers attended.”
 (Employer interviewee from SE Georgia)

Employer Involvement in Education

(21 employer interviewees participated across multiple education levels)

| Target Population | Type of Program/Activity | Number of Employers |
|---------------------|--|---------------------|
| Students | CHOICES and CHOICES-type programs | 14 |
| | Career Fairs | 10 |
| | Job Shadowing | 10 |
| | Youth Apprenticeship | 9 |
| | Tech Prep | 5 |
| Educators | Educator Workplace Experiences | 9 |
| | Industry Tours | 5 |
| Students and Adults | Involvement at Technical and/or Regents Colleges | 12 |

Indicators of Success

Employer participants were asked to evaluate the success of their education participation from several standpoints. The results are summarized below.

Direct involvement judged most successful.

Employers are especially interested in leveraging time and other resources, so they tended to like programs or activities they felt maximized their reach, such as CHOICES-type programs that place trained business people in the classroom to discuss with students how education choices made now can affect the future. Any program or activity that allows employers to speak directly to students is considered a good vehicle for communicating employer expectations about work skills, work ethics, education, and adult responsibilities. Employer participants also found educator workplace experiences to be successful in communicating their expectations; programs such as Summer Educator Academy and industry tours for teachers were given as examples. Some participants, however, felt that being engaged in the continuum of experiences that link education with careers is more successful than any one program or activity. Working directly with educators toward common goals for the benefit of students was

judged by employers to be a particularly successful aspect of participating in the education process.

Benefit to company or community. STW has expanded communities’ awareness of what is available to them in terms of training and career options, as well as given employers an opportunity to showcase their businesses to students and educators. Employer participants feel that, ultimately, participation in STW will contribute to a more technically competent, adaptable workforce. A few of the study participants indicated that their companies have altered their approach to employee development. As a result of their participation in STW, their companies have become more interested in creating an education culture, requiring their employees to continuously upgrade their skills.

“STW has benefited my company by opening it up to the community. A lot of people didn’t really know what we do.... [Now they know] we’re trying to develop the workforce and teach kids that education is important.... It has helped us let the community know that we care and are trying to give something back.”
 (Employer interviewee from SW Georgia)

Continued participation in education. All the study participants said they plan to continue their involvement with schools, postsecondary institutions, educators, and/or students in some way. Interviewees gave a variety of reasons for wanting to continue their work with educators and schools:

- *“Now that my company is larger and my employees are becoming more educated through the technical college and the other professional training that we deliver, I have more free time to be involved in education activities. I’ve seen education transform my workers and that’s why I’m going to see that these STW activities continue.”* (Employer interviewee from NW Georgia)
- *“We will absolutely continue to participate in career/ technical education types of activities. It’s a great opportunity to get the message of work to students and to be able to promote local job opportunities early on so they don’t think they have to go to the big city for a job.”* (Employer interviewee from NE Georgia)
- *“We will continue to participate in STW and other education activities because we believe it is a productive way to help create a better society through reaching students.”* (Employer interviewee from SE Georgia)

- *“I will continue to participate—it gives me enjoyment and a break from work.”* (Employer interviewee from NE Georgia)
- *“We will continue to participate in these types of education activities because it helps the community and it serves our corporate mission.”* (Employer interviewee from NE Georgia)
- *“We’ll continue to participate in education activities because, as a local business, we like to put our money back into the community—particularly in light of recent government cut-backs in education.”* (Employer interviewee from SW Georgia)
- *“I’m going to continue because I have three sons in the education system. It’s important for business leaders to be involved in education in a continuous way in the education environment and in the community.”* (Employer interviewee from SE Georgia)
- *“I’ll continue. The workforce at our facilities is very mature—in two to three years we’ll need to be able to start replacing retirees. We need to create a pipeline to bring a new workforce into the company from the technical colleges.”* (Employer interviewee from SE Georgia)
- *“Participating in the education process is personally rewarding—especially my work with parents.”* (Employer interviewee from NE Georgia)

Involvement of other employers. Two-thirds of the employers have successfully recruited other employers to participate in education programs or activities in their communities.

Challenges to Employer Participation

The few employer participants who experienced challenges in working with the schools cited:

- scheduling and other logistical challenges in implementing new programs,
- convincing school administrators to be open to new opportunities, and
- changing parent mindsets about technical education.

Influences on Company Practices

It appears that company employment practices have not changed very much as a result of involvement in education. Only a few employers, who did not previously ask for school-based records, have begun doing so. The same is true for policies to support employees becoming more involved in their children’s education and for public recognition of employee involvement in education. Employer participants said they see the value of encouraging their companies to pursue these actions, but it is not always economically feasible.

What Encourages Business Involvement

Some employers become involved in education because of their commitment to the community. But employers are more likely to become involved in education when they are approached directly by someone in the education community or as a result of a personal relationship. Often businesses are not involved because they are not asked. But if educators are to garner business support, they must learn to articulate their needs—beyond asking for money. Employers must feel they have a real stake in being at the table. And once collaboration has begun, it is critical for employers to see that educators are taking action on joint decisions.

What Discourages Business Involvement

Interviewees said that, above all, it is important for employers to be substantively involved or they will tend to drift away. Interviewees indicated the main problem in working with educators is not that they talk things to death, but that they don’t take action.

Employer Involvement...

Is encouraged by:

- Communicating needs—tell employers how to participate in the schools
- Having a real stake in the education process
- Building on existing business-education relationships
- Appealing to community spirit
- Trading on personal relationships to get employers to the table

Is discouraged by:

- Token involvement
- Lack of action **once decisions are made**

Further Information

This research brief has been prepared by the Occupational Research Group in the College of Education at the University of Georgia, under contract with the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education, Office of School-to-Work. Principal Investigator on the STW evaluation and assessment project at UGA is Richard L. Lynch. The content of this brief has been extracted from the report: *Assessment of School-to-Work in Georgia: Employer Interviews* by Gail Fletcher, March 2005 (www.coe.uga.edu/ORG). Further information about STW in Georgia may be obtained at www.dtae.org/gastw.

EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEWEE AND COMPANY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

- ▶ Assist with:
 - creating dual enrollment programs
 - curriculum alignment between high school and technical college
 - curriculum development
 - developing skill standards
- ▶ Conduct:
 - classroom demonstrations
 - entrepreneurship classes at technical college
 - mock interviews
 - workshops on how to write a resume and interview
- ▶ Contribute:
 - funding
 - materials and equipment
- ▶ Participate in programs and activities, such as:
 - Big Bucks
 - Boys' and Girls' Clubs
 - Buddy Program
 - career fairs/ career days
 - CHOICES
 - The Game of Real Life
 - Hospitality Expo
 - If I Had a Hammer
 - High Schools, High Tech (for disabled students)
 - job shadowing/ Groundhog Job Shadow Day
 - Junior Achievement
 - Parent-to-Parent
 - Partner Up (educator workplace experience)
 - Pro Start (culinary arts)
 - Readers on Wheels
 - Teachers in Industry/ Summer Educator Academy
 - Tech Prep
 - Work Keys
 - youth apprenticeship
- ▶ Provide:
 - classroom presentations
 - co-operative education experiences for students
 - industry/ company tours for educators and students
 - judges for science fairs
 - mentoring
 - proctors for tests
 - student internships
 - teacher internships/externships
- ▶ Serve on business/education Partnerships or on education committees/entities, such as:
 - Georgia Partners in Education (GA PIE)
 - School Councils
 - PTA/ PTO
 - P-16 Council
 - advisory committees at the technical colleges
 - advisory committees at the high schools

