

# School-to-Work Impact in Georgia Schools Counselor Workshops

## Findings from the Georgia School-To-Work Project

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This brief describes implementation of counselor workshops by four Georgia STW partnerships to increase career awareness of students. Project activities, outcomes, analyses of impact, challenges, and lessons learned are presented.

### Overview of School-to-Work

The federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) was enacted in 1994 to create coherent systems that link *school-based learning* to *work-based learning*, linked through *connecting activities* such as career counseling, job placement assistance, and student involvement with community service. STWOA provided a framework and seed money for states and localities to expand existing programs, add new programs and initiatives when needed, and link them to create more powerful, comprehensive school-to-work systems at the state and/or local level. Georgia received a five-year STWOA grant in 1998 and, through extensions, continued to fund some partnerships through 2005.

### Transition Strategies Grants

The goal of Georgia's School-to-Work (STW) initiative was to achieve systemic and sustainable improvements in education and workforce development. Major focus areas included increasing business and industry involvement with schools, improving student achievement, helping students recognize and act on school and career connections, and preparing students for the workplace and postsecondary education. The Georgia STW Office encouraged local partnerships to apply for a competitive Transitions Strategy Grant to replicate one or more of the state-approved School-to-Work strategies identified in Planning Grants, developed in Implementation Grants, and further refined and evaluated in 22 Demonstration Grants. Statewide assessment of various STW activities identified a number of demonstration models with success in transitioning students to workplaces and postsecondary education, which were considered replicable by other partnerships. These transition strategies were grouped under three areas of the state focus for STW:

#### *Strengthening Student Achievement*

- Testing and remediation in high school
- Teen Prep for high school drop outs and at-risk youth

#### *Increasing career awareness*

- Programs of study – freshman year through two years of postsecondary
- Career transition for middle and high school students and related parent information
- Counselor training workshops

#### *Employer involvement in education*

- Educators/teachers in industry
- Business-educator exchanges

Twelve Transition Strategies Grants were awarded to eleven partnerships in 2004-05 to replicate effective STW transition practices from the above areas. Four of these grants were in the category of counselor training workshops to improve career awareness.

### Counselor Workshops

The STW partnerships awarded grants to implement counselor training workshops in 2004-05 were:

- Career Transition & Work Retention Partnership
- Kennesaw Regional Business & Education Collaborative
- South Partnership
- Valdosta Area STW Partnership

These projects had common objectives, although they varied in the specific activities to address their goals. All of the counselor training workshops included the following:

- Middle and high school counselors participated in innovative workforce options seminars, adapted from a previous STW demonstration grant.
- Employers participated in the design of the workshop curriculum, delivery of the training as panelists, and provision of networking opportunities to participants.
- Workshop curriculum focused on directing students to the wide variety of alternative postsecondary options available to them, as well as linking student interests and skills to the most compatible postsecondary preparation.

- Workshops were evaluated to determine if and how counselor training impacted participant knowledge of jobs, career paths, and postsecondary options.

Projects differed on the length, timing, and number of workshops conducted; the number of schools/school systems participating; the type of educators and grade levels represented (counselors, administrators; elementary, middle, high school); the support offered to participants; the extent of business/industry involvement; and the career resources produced as part of the project. A brief description of each of the projects follow (partnerships are not identified in any particular order).

- Partnership A conducted four half-day interactive workshops to provide current data about employment opportunities, career paths, and postsecondary options to 184 counselors and administrators representing 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades from two school systems. A full-day workshop was conducted in early summer 2005 for middle and high school counselors, teachers, administrators, and community leaders which focused on job growth and trends in the region and included tours of two businesses. Ten counselors participated in a three-day job shadowing experience at a local business. Summer workshop and job shadowing participants each received stipends from the grant. A distinctive feature of this project was presentations made to PTA groups at three middle schools and high schools to provide career and educational information to parents. Outcomes included development of a middle school career guide for middle school teachers and counselors and program of study sheets for middle school students. An interactive web site was activated in late summer 2005 for middle school students.
- Partnership B held 16 half-day workshops on its technical college campus with a total of 177 participants comprised of counselors, teachers, and career coordinators from four of the five school systems within the partnership's service area. Workshop curriculum included previews of *Choices* software for high school career exploration and *Career Futures* software for middle school ages. Forty employers participated at least once over the course of the seminars giving presentations and providing information for workshop handouts. An informational binder and employer directory were developed and given to each workshop participant. Additionally, the State STW office granted additional funding to the partnership for creation of a video/DVD series highlighting edited footage of each industry and topic presenter from the workshops. The video/DVD series, viewed as a means of sustaining the project, was to be distributed to schools, libraries, and community centers for use by parents and counselors.
- Partnership C conducted nine three-hour workforce options workshops during late spring 2005 for a total of 130 counselors and educators from six different

school systems. Local chambers of commerce assisted with planning the workshops which were scheduled at times and dates identified by each school system. Twelve business representatives participated as speakers in the seminars. To encourage educator participation, substitutes were provided when the sessions were held during the school day and stipends were offered for the one session that was held after school hours. A unique aspect of this project entailed developing 47 job profiles and compiling them into a 225-page technical career guide document and CD. A total of 3000 technical career guides were given to each high school for distribution to students and for classroom use; plus each school system received a CD of the guide.

- Partnership D conducted counselor workshops for two different school systems in its service region. Participants included 16 counselors and other representatives from elementary, middle, and high schools in one school system. Each of the participants attended one of two half-day employment overview workshops in fall 2004 and then took part in a full-day business/industry tour in spring 2005. Sessions were developed and presented in conjunction with the local chamber of commerce. Upon completion of the sessions, counselors were expected to produce activities for students utilizing information learned during the workshop and tour. Resulting products included career cluster job information for career day activities and program of study guide sheets for student career decision-making in high school and for postsecondary education. In addition, four one-day training sessions were held for the other school system with the assistance of local businesses, employment and education agencies, and the chamber of commerce. Fifty-four counselors participated representing elementary, middle, and high schools. These workshops differed from the others since training sessions were designed to meet the needs of counselors based on a pre-training assessment process. Each workshop focused on career information (job profiles, career pathways), counseling resources, and included a tour of a local business who hosted the workshop itself.

### **Evaluation of Workshop Impact**

ORG researchers worked with each Transition Grant recipient to develop an overall evaluation design and instruments that would be consistent with activities approved for the grant and that would result in data and information to help the Georgia STW office assess the impact of the model transition strategies. Because the four counselor training workshops were similar in many ways, evaluation of these projects involved use of a common assessment to measure changes resulting from participation in the workshops.

### **Survey Development**

Prior to initiation of project activities, ORG researchers met with coordinators of the four counselor workshop projects to discuss goals of the training and workshop activities and to identify common assessments of the workshop objectives. The final questionnaire containing 23 items was developed with input from project coordinators and reflected the primary focus and desired outcomes of the planned workshops. The purpose of the pre-post survey was to assess the impact of the workshop content and activities on participants' knowledge of jobs, attitudes about career options, satisfaction with career resources, and interaction with industries. The questionnaire was to be distributed to all workshop participants prior to the session and again upon completion of the counselor training workshop in each of the four projects.

Survey items assessed workshop participants' understanding and opinions about the various topics included in training sessions. The questionnaire items were categorized into four areas:

- Knowledge of jobs/careers – 9 items (example: *I can name the top five high growth industries in my county*)
- Attitudes toward career counseling – 5 items (example: *I think career counseling is very important for all students in high school*)
- Satisfaction with career resources – 5 items (example: *I am satisfied with the career source materials that I use with students*)
- Interaction with industry- 4 items (example: *I have worked with local business/industry representatives in helping students to explore career choices*).

Workshop participants were instructed to mark the response that indicated the extent of their agreement with each item based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, with *unsure* being the midpoint.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Each project coordinator was instructed to administer the survey to workshop participants before and after each workshop session. Total responses received from the four projects included 536 pre-workshop surveys and 500 post-workshop surveys.

Although coordinators were asked to only report data from participants who completed both the pre and post surveys, this did not occur in the survey administration for some workshop respondents. However, most of the survey responses do represent responses of participants both before and after they completed workshop sessions. Within each project, survey responses were aggregated across all workshops with similar content into one set of pre and post responses and were reported separately for workshops that differed in content and approach. Survey data summarized below includes results from 37 different workshop sessions conducted throughout the 2004-05 academic year and summer session.

Survey results for each item were analyzed by reporting frequencies for each item response on both the pre- and post-workshop survey. Change rates were calculated by identifying percentages of respondents who strongly agreed/agreed, who strongly disagreed/ disagreed, or who were unsure for each item on both the pre and post surveys. The difference in the percentages for pre and post responses was the change rate for that item. Overall rates of change from pre- to post-workshop survey responses for all 500+ workshop participants were examined, as were the rates of change for each of the four partnerships on each of the survey items.

### **Findings**

Responses were analyzed across partnerships to determine what outcomes or impacts were realized as a result of participation in the counselor workshops. These analyses indicate that the most positive impacts of workshop activities occurred in the areas of (a) knowledge or understanding that participants gained about high growth companies in their region, and (b) job and educational opportunities for students. Five of the six items with the greatest increase in percent of respondent agreement were in the category of knowledge of jobs and careers. Following their participation in the workshop, there was a 31% increase in those who said they could tell students about programs in technical colleges preparing them for high growth jobs. Likewise, from 21 to 30 percent more participants said they could name the top high growth industries, companies, and jobs in their county, as well as the career majors in high school connected to these high growth job areas. One other item that showed a strong positive increase following the workshop (20%) was satisfaction with how business/industry work with students on career activities, which may have been linked to greater knowledge of these activities.

The following items had the most positive rates of change from pre- to post-workshop responses:

- being able to *tell students what programs are offered by technical colleges suited for each of the high growth jobs in my county* (+31%);
- being able to *name two companies in each high growth industry in my county* (+30%);
- *[naming] the top five high growth industries in my county* (+25%);
- *[naming] the career majors and courses in high school connected to jobs in high growth companies* (+21%); and
- *[naming] at least two jobs students can pursue in each high growth company* (+21%).

**These results provide evidence that the workshops were successful in increasing counselor knowledge and awareness of careers and job opportunities in the local areas, the education needed for these jobs, and the availability of technical college options.**

Attempts to influence counselor attitudes about career counseling and technical colleges were less successful. Three of the five most negative results related to counselor attitudes. After completing the workshop, nearly 12% fewer counselors agreed that career counseling was important for all students in high school, 9% fewer agreed most high school students would benefit from exploring work settings in business/industry, and 8% fewer agreed that technical colleges were a viable option for many students.

In comparing survey results for the four counselor training projects, positive outcomes (gains in percent of participants agreeing with statements) were highest overall for partnership D and lowest for partnership B. It should be noted that partnership B was the only project of the four that did not include an activity for counselors to go onsite to a local business/industry for visits, job shadowing, tours, or on-site workshops. Following the training workshop, partnership B counselors were less likely to see the importance of career counseling for all students, the value of students spending time in business/industry to explore jobs, or the viability of technical colleges for many students. Fewer said they would like to work with local business/industry to help students find career opportunities, which contrasted sharply with responses from workshop participants who had visited industry sites as part of the project. This outcome seems to indicate that **just providing information about jobs is not as powerful as first hand experiences with company settings in changing counselor attitudes about the connections between schooling and work.**

The partnership with the most positive results was the only one that actually required participants to produce activities for students that used the information learned from the workshop and tour of industry. **In terms of changing awareness and attitudes of counselors, requiring application of new knowledge by participants seems to have the most positive outcomes.**

### **Project Successes and Challenges**

The overall evaluation of the four counselor training workshops also considered how well the projects were able to involve local employers and educators, what products resulted from the project, and how the challenges of involving busy school personnel in workshops were resolved (or not). Following are some of the successes identified overall by the assessment process.

- Workshop participants were able to gain knowledge about high growth industries in their local communities and jobs available for students.
- Scheduling workshop and business-related activities outside of regular school hours resulted in better participation.
- Offering stipends and substitute support for educators facilitated participation.
- Employers were willing to become involved with planning and delivery of workshop activities,

preparation of materials, and inviting counselors into their workplaces to gain an understanding of job requirements.

- Sustainability efforts included project products such as DVD/videos, technical career guides, employer handbooks, and career/educational materials for schools, parents, and community agencies to use with students.

In addition, projects faced a number of challenges as they implemented the counselor training workshops. Several projects found that they had projected a higher participation level than they were able to accomplish, even when they had prior commitments from system and school-level personnel. The reasons for this need to be better understood and addressed. In addition, guidance counselors had difficulty being granted time away from school during the school day to participate in the workshops or business/industry visits. Alternative scheduling was needed but not always possible.

### **Conclusions**

The overall purpose of the STW counselor training workshops was to improve student career awareness by providing information to counselors about job, career, and educational options for students to facilitate the school-to-work transition. Project coordinators hoped that by expanding information and resources available to school counselors and creating more opportunities for interaction with employers in local business/industry, counselors would increase their knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of the importance of assisting students with career exploration and decision making in high school. While these workshops were short-term activities often only lasting one-half day, they did seem to have an impact on many participants by providing opportunities to interact with employers, learn about high growth jobs and training required for these jobs. Because all of the projects also involved technical colleges in their workshop, many participants did develop a better understanding of postsecondary technical program options for students.

### **Further Information**

This brief has been prepared by Dorothy Harnish and Grace Thornton of 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 information gathered from August 1, 2004 through September 30, 2005 from the project directors, October 2004, January 2005, April 2005, and July 2005 quarterly reports, the final project reports, and ORG mid-term and final status reports. Further information about STW in Georgia may be obtained at <http://www.dtae.org/gastw>