

# Making Transitions from School to Work

*For too many young people, bridging the school-to-work gulf is a do-it-yourself experience. We must fundamentally change the system in order to help students successfully move into the work force.*

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There they were, images flashing across our television screens night after night. Nineteen- and 20-year-olds manning the sophisticated Patriot missile batteries, maintaining the ultra-high tech aircraft defense systems, clearing mine fields, moving soldiers and material hundreds of miles on a moment's notice. The Gulf War vividly demonstrated what the American armed services have learned over the last 15 years: that young Americans from all backgrounds can quickly make the transition from the youthful indulgences of high school to responsible adulthood, given the proper motivation, training, and example from adults. It is a lesson that the rest of us — teachers, employers, parents, union leaders, and government officials — have yet to absorb.

## The Lost Generation

For most of our young people, the United States has a more or less do-it-yourself system for making the transition from school to work. Approximately 20 million 16- to 24-year-olds are unlikely to go directly on to college after high school. With our present "system," they often bounce between a series of jobs until, eventually,

some employer decides they're "seasoned" enough to be treated seriously. As a result, young people frequently take a decade or more to bridge the school-to-work gulf, and many, especially the children of the poor, never make it.

The absence of an effective system to help non-college-bound young people make a smooth transition from high school to the primary labor market costs us dearly, both socially and economically. For a majority of American students, what they learned in school is not adequately related to what they need to know to succeed after leaving school. Students not planning to immediately go on to college receive little in the way of systematic assistance in preparing for and finding jobs when they leave school, even though over 80 percent of all jobs, while not requiring a four-year college degree, do demand high levels of specialized knowledge and skills. This has resulted in high youth unemployment, shortages of adequately prepared young people entering the labor market, and an increasingly noncompetitive economy drifting to low-skill, low-wage jobs.

These problems derive from many sources. Until recently, the schools did

not feel responsible for students after they left the classroom. Employers blamed schools for entry-level workers' poor academic preparation and lax work habits. Yet these same employers had minimal contact with the schools and provided little in the way of structured training for the high school students or recent graduates they hired, often preferring to avoid hiring them entirely. Meanwhile, unions concentrated their efforts on their membership, the bulk of which consists of mature workers. Finally, job training and placement programs concentrated on equipping dropouts and recent graduates with minimal technical skills training and job-seeking skills, only to leave them at the door of the employer.

As American employers decried their inability to find young workers with the skills critical for success, our foreign competitors discovered the wisdom of investing in their future

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work force. Indeed, most young people in Europe and Asia move directly into the primary labor market by age 20 or 21, normally with a set of job skills that are in demand.

American schools and employers are acknowledging the lack of a successful system for bridging this critical and growing gap between high school and meaningful work. Both

schools, rose dramatically during the 1980s from fewer than 20,000 in 1980 to more than 140,000 by the end of the decade. These partnerships were comfortable; neither the schools nor the businesses had to change the way they had traditionally operated. Yet, by the middle of the past decade, leaders in business, education, and government began to realize that such efforts, as welcome as they were, had little long-term impact.

In Boston and elsewhere, broad community-based business-education coalitions were formed to find new ways to work with school districts. These compacts were formal agreements whereby business offered to provide jobs and other incentives if students agreed to stay in school, and the schools agreed to make systematic efforts to raise students' academic success and attendance. Beginning in 1986, the National Alliance of Business sponsored the Compact Project in Albuquerque, Cincinnati, Detroit, Indianapolis, Louisville, Memphis, Miami/Dade County, Pittsburgh, Providence, Rochester, San Diego, and Seattle. In the following years other communities around the nation formed similar coalitions, many gaining national attention.

Perhaps the greatest breakthrough has been the growing recognition that school reform requires the full commitment of all partners to systematically change the way we approach education in this country.

### The Quality Connection

Building upon its experience with the Compact Project, the National Alliance of Business initiated a new school-to-work transition model known as the Quality Connection Consortium. In 1990, NAB, the Bank of America, Sears Roebuck and Co., and local school districts in San Fran-

cisco, California, and DuPage County, Illinois, forged a new level of business and education partnerships: employers took direct responsibility for a portion of the educational enterprise.

There is a major difference between the original designs of NAB's two demonstration projects. In the Compact Project, the primary purpose of the jobs was to motivate students to stay in school; in the Quality Connection, the job serves as an incentive to remain in school, but it is also a significant part of the learning experience, designed to teach skills by embedding them in a curriculum keyed to the requirements of the job.

As a work-based school-to-work transition program, the Quality Connection provides students with real jobs that can serve as the first step on a career ladder. By performing these jobs alongside adults, these students gain more than a window on the world of work; they also gain an apprenticeship in adulthood.

Learning that takes place on the job is structured so as to ensure a thorough understanding of all job tasks, along with how the job tasks fit together, and how the job fits into the rest of the company. This experience requires that certain conditions be in place: the achievement of learning objectives, the use of an experienced worker or supervisor to work closely with the student employee, and a formal process for the employer to certify that skills and competencies have been learned.

School-based learning is also fundamentally restructured. The Quality Connection emphasizes active student involvement, teamwork, and problem-solving, goal-setting, and decision-making skills. All of these efforts to design and implement a thoroughly integrated school-to-work transition curriculum require close cooperation

sectors readily admit that the present circumstances must be changed if America's young people are to have a chance to get ahead and if American businesses are to have a chance to compete.

### Business and Education Partnerships

Early business-education initiatives were essentially an extension of traditional corporate charity. Individual businesses donated funds, equipment, and staff time to individual schools. The number of business-education partnerships, most of which followed the model of businesses "adopting"

between the educators and the employers.

### A National Collaboration

The American public has yet to accept the idea that government, education, employers, and organized labor should collaborate to develop human resources rather than maintain institutional isolation. Too often, education is aloof from the real world, business is interested only in technical training, government is concerned only with regulations, and organized labor is primarily interested in protecting work rules and seniority.

This picture has begun to change in the last decade. Enlightened representatives of all sectors have begun a true partnership — where each receives something of value in return for relinquishing some measure of independence and authority. The successful examples of the nations of Europe and the Pacific Rim have not been lost on these leaders. The growth of business-education partnerships, of local private industry councils, of quasi-public economic development institutions, and of government supported work-based learning are examples of this trend.

However, the movement is relatively new and still quite fragile. Most educators are still suspicious of the motives of employers, and most employers remain wary of investing substantively in the preparation of new employees in cooperation with public institutions. Many individual programs address some of the issues, and many are successful within a limited scope. Most, however, are not linked together as part of a comprehensive system of education.

Programs include cooperative, special, and vocational education; drop-out prevention programs; jobs programs targeted to disadvantaged

youth; and "academies" within schools, most operating as add-ons to the existing school curriculums. Aside from the fact that very few are performance-driven or involve structured on-the-job learning, they typically operate independently from one another, without benefit of an overall system to ensure that they complement one another and best serve students.

activities in both the school and work settings.

- All students have focused curriculums from 9th grade on, but are free to move among curriculum options based upon performance and desire.
- Structured on-the-job learning is linked to academic learning, but does not substitute for academic course work.



A student learns graphic arts through hands-on experience and guidance from his teacher.

Ohio Department of Education

What is needed is overall systemic change rather than yet another program. In an integrated framework for school-to-work transition, the system would not only institute new and effective ways of learning, but it would also link the many individual programs to provide a complete range of education and training for every student.

Under this new system:

- All students' education is comprehensive. Students attain core educational competencies, gain a first-hand understanding of the world of work, and actively participate in learning

- All learning is performance driven; all evaluation is outcome-based.

- Structured on-the-job learning is based on performance analysis of critical competencies along a defined career path.

### The Time is Right

Last summer the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) produced a report for the U.S. Department of Labor entitled *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. Originally commissioned by Elizabeth

Dole, former DOL Secretary, the SCANS report defined the skills required for effective job performance, or workplace know-how. The skills identified included basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities such as responsibility, integrity, and honesty. The report also identified five distinct competencies: using resources, working with others, acquiring information, understanding systems, and using technology. (For a complete discussion of the report, see "Taking Action on the SCANS Report," p. 27.)

In April of last year, President Bush unveiled his four-part America 2000 education strategy, saying that:

Eighty-five percent of America's work force for the year 2000 is

already in the work force today, so improving schools for today's and tomorrow's students is not enough to assure a competitive America in 2000. . . . We need more than job skills to live well in America today. We need to learn more to become better parents, neighbors, citizens and friends. Education is not just about making a living; it is also about making a life.

And that is why we need to move beyond our makeshift, do-it-yourself system. Employers and educators need to work together to systematically change the way we prepare young people for the world of work. Today's youth population must be assured of the opportunity to "make a life" for themselves — a life where they will have the education, the training, the skills, and the support to be the

productive workers, consumers, and citizens our country needs.

## References

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