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SCHOOL-TO-WORK

What Is School-to-Work?

School-to-work (STW) is an ambitious reform effort that attempts to align the nation's educational system with the modern workplace in order to better prepare all students for the full-range of postsecondary education and employment opportunities. The STW initiative began in the late 1980s when a handful of states and communities began experimenting with various approaches to educational reform and career development. Concerned that many young people were "turned-off" by school and ill-prepared for the world of work, these pioneers sought to create a system that would make academic learning more exciting and relevant to all students and, at the same time, equip them with the higher-order skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing workplace. STW efforts intensified with the enactment of the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, which provided "seed" money to help states carry out STW plans. Today, STW systems operate in most states and hundreds of local communities. STW is a growing and evolving endeavor that has captured

the attention of government, education, and the community at large.

School-to-work involves three fundamental elements: school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities. **School-based learning** is classroom instruction that integrates high academic standards with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the workplace. Through school-based learning real-world applications serve as a context to organize and teach academic subject matter and practical skills. Instruction is hands-on and learner-centered, with students actively engaged in their own learning. Classroom instruction is supplemented by a variety of career development activities that reinforce the link between school and work, including career exploration and counseling, employer presentations, job shadowing, and worksite visits.

Work-based learning, considered the heart of STW, is a planned program of work experience that is carefully coordinated with school-based studies. Through work-based learning the workplace becomes an active learning environment where

students can apply their classroom knowledge and gain vital workplace skills in a real-life setting. The most ambitious examples of work-based models are internships, co-ops and apprenticeships, which require placements at worksites. Less intensive programs include community service projects, work simulations, student-run businesses, and attempts to enhance the educational value of jobs students may already have.

Connecting activities link school-based and work-based opportunities to ensure that the student is not the only thread that ties the two. They include matching students with employers/worksites, providing school-site mentors to serve as liaisons between employers and school personnel, and assisting schools and employers in integrating the learning that occurs in school and in the workplace.

Because STW systems create a linkage between learning and work, *partnerships* between schools and employers are essential to system success. Also critical to success are partnerships with government agencies, labor unions, community organizations, postsecondary institutions, school board members, and parents.

Why Is School-to-Work Important?

Twenty years ago, a young person could finish high school with a minimal education and few skills, get a good factory job, and earn a decent living for the rest of his or her life. But profound changes in the nation's economy over the past two decades have altered that likelihood. Growing international competition, new technologies, and the faster pace of change have dramatically transformed the nature of work and the skills required for workers. These changes, however, have not been adequately reflected in our nation's school system.

Far too many students leave high school with poor academic skills and narrow or nonexistent work preparation. Although the majority of students expect to go to a four-year college and have high-status jobs in the future, only one-quarter will ever earn a bachelor's degree. About half will not find steady employment until their early 30s. And most will shift from one low-paying job to another with little opportunity for training or career advancement.

STW has the potential for resolving these problems and for bringing the outcomes of the educational process more in line with the skills and knowledge needs of the

workplace. It is one of the few reforms with the goal of helping students see that learning in school relates to life beyond school—that learning and working are not separate activities.

What Do People Say About School-to-Work?

STW has both critics as well as champions. Those opposed to STW and/or confused by it, level the following charges:

- STW is only for the non-college-bound.
- STW results in an inferior educational program, a *dumbing-down* of the curriculum.
- Students' academic performance will suffer in STW programs.
- STW is another label for vocational education.

Advocates, on the other hand, dismiss the criticisms, calling them myths. They argue that STW can prepare *all* students for entry into both higher education and high-skill employment. They claim that STW programs improve the quality and relevance of education, and complement "high standards" reform. And they cite the following student benefits:

- STW keeps students more interested in and more challenged by their studies than traditional academic coursework.
- STW deepens students' understanding of academic subject matter, and at the same time helps them develop critical workplace and career-related skills.
- STW encourages students to pursue further education and training.

What Does The Research Say About School-to-Work?

Since STW is a relatively new reform effort, published reports concerning student accomplishments are rare. Much of what we do know (outside of New York State) comes from small-scale, qualitative evaluations and/or anecdotes from individual programs. In general, this evidence suggests that students who participate in STW activities are motivated by what they are doing and have a better sense of their career options.

Some studies have documented lower dropout rates, improved attendance, greater academic course-taking, and improved self-esteem among STW students. Little information, however, exists on the link

between STW and student achievement or economic outcomes.

The recent national evaluation of STW – the first installment in a 5-year study – has focused on states' efforts to build STW systems. The early findings suggest that progress is being made toward achieving the goals outlined by the federal STW legislation, but that far more work is necessary if STW systems are to accomplish positive, lasting change. According to the study,

- states have taken steps to create a STW infrastructure, but these efforts are just beginning and no state's work is yet comprehensive or complete,
- STW concepts are spreading in schools, but in many cases STW is peripheral to other educational reforms,
- the most widely implemented STW activities are those designed to create career awareness; few schools have developed a coherent sequence of activities that involve students in a progression of in-depth career exploration,
- many local STW partnerships have made work-based learning their top priority, but local constraints limit efforts to expand these activities

and link them to the school curriculum, and

- student participation in some STW activities is high, but few students participate in multiple school-based, work-based or connecting activities.

As implementation efforts evolve, the national evaluation will examine the long-term consequences of STW on students.

What Is the Status Of School-to-Work in New York State?

In 1995, New York State applied for and subsequently received a \$10 million federal STW grant, which was the largest first-year award in the nation. Since that time, an additional \$40 million in federal monies has been awarded to the State to build a STW system.

The Department of Education is responsible for managing the system, working closely with the School-to-Work Advisory Council, the State's interagency governing board. At the local level, 52 partnerships have been funded to implement STW activities in communities throughout the State. Over the past two years, the partnerships have worked with more than 3,000 schools and 11,000 employers. Approximately 700,000 students have

been active participants in STW efforts.

In late 1997, an evaluation progress report on the State's STW system was completed by the program evaluators, Westchester Institute for Human Services Research Inc. Findings from this two-year study mirrored the national evaluation results, highlighting both opportunities and challenges associated with achieving broad-scale STW reform. For example, the researchers reported that

- elements of STW were evolving throughout the State, but they were not yet solidly in place;
- STW activities generally were not implemented as systemic efforts; seldom were they aligned with overall school goals or with other educational reform efforts,
- STW projects typically were small in scale and scope; few projects linked school- and work-based learning,
- most school-based activities were onetime events designed to promote career awareness; few students were exposed to in-depth career development experiences,

- promising work-based projects were evident, but they generally served few students; even in the most active STW schools, a small number of high school seniors were exposed to structured work experiences.

There also was "good news" from the researchers: New York State surpassed the national average in terms of the percentage of schools, students, and employers participating in STW activities. Furthermore, the participation rates in New York had increased significantly in the last two years.

Perhaps the most significant evaluation finding concerned student outcomes. The researchers learned that students who actively participated in STW programs had higher grade point averages, were absent from school less often, failed fewer academic courses, enrolled in more challenging math and science courses, and were more decisive about their career direction than comparable students with little or no STW exposure.

According to the researchers, and contrary to some STW critics, these findings suggest that STW participation did not result in any measur-

able loss in achievement or school performance—STW did not take away from the basics.

Although it may take considerable time before the ultimate impact of STW on students can be demonstrated, these preliminary findings have been greeted with enthusiasm by State leaders. Both co-chairs of New York's STW Advisory Council believe that the student outcomes demonstrated to date prove that STW is an effective vehicle for helping students attain high learning standards and therefore, justify continued and expanded support in New York.

For More Information:

National:
National School-to-Work Office:
<http://www.stw.ed.gov>

New York State:
New York State Education Department Office of Workforce Preparation and Continuing Education
<http://www.nysed.gov>

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments on this topic. Please e-mail us or send us a FAX. NOTE: references used in preparing the *Balanced View* are available upon request.