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ABSTRACT

To study employer motivations for participating in school-to-work (STW) programs, researchers sought programs with a strong work-based learning component, specifically those where employers took students as interns or apprentices for one or two school years. In 1995 and 1996, 1 or 2 site visits were made to each of 12 programs. Researchers toured schools; interviewed students, teachers, counselors, principals, and intermediaries who helped broker employer participation; observed classes; visited worksites; and interviewed employers. The 12 work-based learning programs were divided into 3 categories according to whether they lacked students, employers, or neither. Earlier research identified three types of motivation that affect employers' decisions to participate in STW programs: philanthropic, individual, and collective. Researchers engaged in strategic thinking and planning regarding employer recruitment and retention, pondering which type of appeal would convince which type of employer. The philanthropic approach could backfire if the implication was that employers did not already give to their communities. Employers saw these individual benefits: public relations and use of students as needed temporary help. One type of collective motivation was the goal of marketing an industry as a whole to young people. Future research topics were identified: STW acceptance and student demand, integration between work-based and student-based learning, and work-based learning and attention to quality. (YLB)

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# IEE BRIEF

## EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT IS NOT THE PROBLEM: A STUDY OF SCHOOL-TO- WORK TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Katherine L. Hughes

Concerned about the preparedness of American youth for changing work-places, Congress passed the School-to-Work Opportunities Act in 1994. The goal was "to facilitate the creation of a universal, high-quality school-to-work transition system" through educator and employer partnerships (U.S. 103rd Congress, Title VIII, Section 3). Schools are to create a planned program of work-based learning, and implement "connecting activities" to bring about the integration of school-based and work-based learning.

This Brief reports on findings from a three-year research project focused on the question of whether sufficient numbers of employers can be recruited in order to create a national school-to-work system with a substantial work-based learning component. The research attempted to find out what strategies are used to enlist employers, which are successful, and why employers become involved and stay involved.

Despite widespread endorsement of the school-to-work model (Bailey & Merritt, 1997), some researchers doubt whether enough employers can be recruited so that all students can have access to work-based learning through internships or apprenticeships, much less the planned program of school-related work experience for which the legislation calls. Osterman and others contend that high-quality training programs that teach skills ask too much of employers and are thus unlikely to be replicated; hence "the prospects for widespread employer participation seem bleak" (Osterman, 1995, p.79).

Yet other research finds that employer recruitment and retention is not an insurmountable obstacle. Jobs for the Future's National Youth Apprenticeship Initiative, a study of ten programs around the country from 1991 to 1994, found that while most of the programs began with a focus in one industry, almost all increased the number of participating industries,

and "the intensity of employer involvement has increased over time" (Kopp, Kazis & Churchill, 1995, p.10). Another study of cooperative education sites found that "employer recruitment was not a significant problem and that there were generally enough employer slots for the referral of eligible students" (Lynn & Wills, 1994, p.23).

### RESEARCH METHODS AND SITES

To study employer motivations for participating in school-to-work programs, researchers sought programs with a strong work-based learning component. Some school-to-work initiatives offer students one-day job-shadowing opportunities, or short-term mentors from the business community, and while these activities are certainly valuable, programs where students spend regular and significant amounts of time at workplaces require the most commitment from employers. To learn why the most involved employers had chosen to participate, programs were looked at where employers took students as interns or apprentices over the course of one or two school years. Twelve case-study programs were identified and recruited, and in 1995 and 1996 at least one and in some cases two site visits to each of the programs were conducted. In addition, researchers regularly followed up with the programs.

At each site IEE researchers toured the schools and interviewed students, teachers, counselors, principals, and intermediaries who helped broker the participation of employers. Researchers observed classes, visited worksites, and interviewed employers, including the staff who coordinated the student interns, and the individuals who supervised and mentored them.

The twelve work-based learning programs include new as well as older, more established programs, and they can be divided into three categories according to whether they lack students, employers, or neither. The fact that the main problem of some programs is that they lack students, rather than employers, is significant, as it calls into question the assumption that employer participation is the principal challenge to creating a school-to-work system.

### Student-Constrained

The following programs have more difficulty recruiting students than they do employers; in fact, the latter two programs have ceased to operate because of a lack of student enrollment:

- the New Visions Medical Careers program in Rochester, New York, is a senior-year, full-day program, in which up to forty students alternate between academic health-based classes and unpaid internships in two different hospital departments;
- the New Visions Graphic Communications program was a printing program also in Rochester and modeled on the health program; and
- the Madison-Oneida BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education Services) Manufacturing Technologies Program, located in a rural area outside Syracuse, New York, was a program in which ten to twelve seniors were placed in work-sites three mornings a week, and their work experiences were coordinated with applied academic work.

### Employer-Constrained

Once there is steady student demand, some programs have difficulty securing large numbers of employers to provide work-based learning placements. Following is a list of programs where interested students may be turned away or have to wait for a placement:

- the Education for Employment (EFE) School-to-Careers system in Philadelphia, which places over 1,500 juniors and seniors in paid internships one or two days a week;
- the Greater Lehigh Valley Youth Apprenticeship Program in Pennsylvania, a two-year magnet high school that enrolled approximately 100 students and placed them in paid apprenticeships but is no longer operating;
- the New York City High School of Economics and Finance, a four-year magnet high school with 450 students that requires the completion of three internships;
- the Financial Learning Academy of Genesee (FLAG) of the Genesee Area Skills Center (GASC) in Flint, Michigan, which places about 50 students a year in three worksite classrooms and short-term paid positions at area financial institutions; and

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- the Manufacturing Technology Partnership (MTP), also of the GASC in Flint and created through a partnership with General Motors, which places almost 100 students in paid internships each year.

### ***Established - Stable Numbers of Students and Employers***

The established programs have steady student demand and, if not high employer recruitment, then high employer retention.

- LaGuardia Community College in New York City enrolls 10,000 students and places 2,000 students with over 300 employers every year.
- Careers in Health in Flint, Michigan is a half-day medical occupations program that places 250 students a year in hospitals and other healthcare worksites.
- City-As-School, a New York City high school, enrolls 650 students and awards high school credits for internships with over 350 participating employers.
- Kalamazoo County Education for Employment in Michigan is a school-to-work system that enrolls over 2,000 students in twenty-five different career clusters and has over 100 employers who offer work-based learning opportunities.

### **EMPLOYER MOTIVATIONS**

Bailey (1995) identified three types of motivation that may affect employers' decisions to participate in school-to-work programs: philanthropic, individual, and collective. Employers may decide to provide work-based learning placements for philanthropic or altruistic reasons, such as reaching out to the community or helping youth. Or they may become school-to-work partners to bring benefits to their firm, such as the positive public relations from publicizing their contribution to education. In addition, student interns may be of use as short-term, no-cost or low-cost labor. Work-based learning programs may also be used by employers as part of their long-term labor recruitment strategy. Finally, there are collective reasons for employer participation. The collective perspective is that while companies might not benefit immediately or directly from their own student interns, the broad implementation of school-to-work

would strengthen the labor supply for all.

Employer involvement in the initiation and development phases occurred in all but two of our programs. The dialogue that occurs between educators and employers during the formation of a program can determine the particular philosophy of the program. In some programs, internships are considered and called "learning experiences," and the aim is to treat interns as learners and expose them to a wide range of workplace activities. In other programs, internships are called "jobs," and employers use interns as they would regular employees. The motivations behind the employers' involvement—do they want to be seen as partners in improving the education system, or do they want to train and hire labor—shape the program.

### **EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

As students, parents, and educators buy into school-to-work programs, and enrollment increases, how do program personnel recruit employers to meet increasing student demand for work placements? Program personnel engage in a great deal of strategic thinking and planning regarding employer recruitment and retention, pondering which type of appeal—philanthropic, individual or collective—will convince which type of employer.

#### ***The Philanthropic Appeal***

There are mixed views on the value of the philanthropic appeal. One school-to-careers coordinator from Philadelphia said that they tell employers, "Here are children from your own community that you can actually directly help." She states that employers like to work with a particular school in their own community. Yet coordinators from other programs told us that while participating employers often cite philanthropic reasons (among others) for their involvement, program personnel find that this approach can backfire if the implication is that employers do not already give to their communities.

Still, even those who do not use this sort of appeal believe that philanthropic reasons do motivate employers. One internship coordinator said that she has certain employers to whom she can send the most troubled students; she knows that those employers will continue in the

program however little they receive from their participation. The impression of teachers at New York City's High School of Economics and Finance is that employers become involved because "they feel sorry for inner-city public school kids."

#### ***The Individual Benefits Appeal***

(1) Public relations. We were told by the staff of Philadelphia's school-to-work initiative that Philadelphia's hospitals use their participation for public relations purposes. Moreover, one employer's involvement can help program personnel succeed with further recruitment; the program is given legitimacy in the eyes of other employers, and non-participants may feel compelled to become involved so they do not look bad in comparison with participants.

(2) Labor need. In a survey of participating employers carried out by the Office of Technology Assessment, nearly two-thirds of employers cited recruitment goals as the most important reason for their participation (Office of Technology Assessment, 1995). Because student interns are either free or are paid a low hourly wage and given no benefits, some employers use school-to-work programs as temporary agencies; the costs of supervising students evidently do not outweigh the benefits of the students' labor.

The Flint FLAG program is structured so that the participating firms can use the students as temporary help. Program staff match students to firms' projects, and students leave their work-site classrooms for these projects, which can last from one day to several weeks. Students are paid \$5.00 an hour. One student helped a bank put into place a new computer software system, but other projects are more mundane, such as microfilming and shredding.

At LaGuardia Community College, the faculty recruits employers by stressing the employers' cost benefits. Faculty point out that they screen the students, employers pay no benefits, and no long-term commitment to an individual is required. They argue that their students are better than temps, because the students are more motivated. In short, the recruitment strategy at LaGuardia is to ask the employers to give the students a real job experience; employers are not

called on to be educators. The school-based co-op seminars are used to find added educational value in the jobs.

An employer who takes interns from New York City's High School of Economics and Finance said they probably could not take interns if they had to pay them. When we asked a focus group of students from this school why they thought employers became involved, the students said almost simultaneously: "Free labor!" While the student responses weren't all negative, one student had the impression that employers take interns not to give them a learning experience but simply to do their most tedious work.

Many employers use school-to-work programs to recruit permanent, full-time employees. A railway maintenance yard for Philadelphia's SEPTA public transportation system is successfully using the city's school-to-career system to recruit apprentices; at this worksite student interns follow a demanding curriculum and are paid \$9.60 an hour. Through the Flint Manufacturing Technologies Partnership (MTP) school-to-work program, General Motors can rely on a steady stream of young recruits who are prepared for the apprenticeship examination.

(3) Boosting the morale of regular employees. Having to teach their job to an interested young person renews employees' pride in their work. Our findings agree with those of Kazis and Goldberger, who state that "employers report...that having young people in their workplaces motivates existing employees...and improves the quality of supervision and coaching, for the adult workforce as well as for the young people" (1995, 188-9).

### *The Collective Appeal*

One type of collective motivation is the goal of marketing an industry as a whole to young people. The owner of a Lehigh Valley electrical wiring company characterized his participation in the apprenticeship program as a "selling job." He pointed out that the work done by his employees is perceived as dirty and un-glamorous, thus he appreciated having the opportunity to teach a wide audience, educators as well as students, about the more modern and technical aspects of his industry. The goal of the Flint FLAG program is to upgrade the

skills of the area labor force as a whole, which could ultimately benefit all the local employers. Similarly, in Flint Careers in Health, the successful half-day medical occupations program, the participating employers hope that the program will induce locally trained youth to stay in the area.

The examples of collective motivations are not as common as individual incentives. More importantly, in all of these cases the employers are also hoping to benefit individually through their participation. Clearly, motivation is not an either/or issue. For example, the success of City-As-School High School rests on a key trade-off: in exchange for their willingness to help at-risk youth, employers get free labor. Yet, as a program staff member put it, the employers must have a great deal of altruism because otherwise "they wouldn't be doing it with all the problems the kids have." The employers are also proud to have helped interns turn their lives around.

### *Going to Scale*

To address the important question of whether the school-to-work reform can "go to scale," we must look at what going to scale means for the employer-constrained programs in our sample.

The Flint Manufacturing Technologies Program, and the Financial Learning Academy of Genesee, are designed to be small-to-medium-sized "theme" alternatives in a larger school-to-work system. The Flint area, then, is following the successful Kalamazoo model, in which "going to scale" means incrementally adding programs in additional local-based occupational areas. Philadelphia's program also follows this model, and has grown over the past few years to its current six occupational areas.

The High School of Economics and Finance is a magnet school, meaning that its school-to-work curriculum is only one of several educational alternatives from which students can choose. It already operates at capacity, with approximately 450 students. Going to scale—offering work-based learning to all high school students in the area—would mean creating additional magnet schools modeled on school-to-work and/or reforming the schools that already

exist. If this were to happen, program coordinators from each school would compete with each other for employer partners, so there would be a need to centralize employer recruitment efforts.

It is likely that the employer partners initially recruited are those whose participation was won most easily. In that case, the forecast for going to scale is gloomy, because if those who have already been recruited are necessarily those most likely to participate, further recruitment might be very difficult indeed, considering the extent of the resources spent to achieve the current level of employer involvement. Alternatively, it is possible that if school-to-work becomes better understood and more well-known, it will be easier for program staff to find employer partners.

Further research should address the possibility that as work-based learning programs multiply, there will be more competition for student placements, and programs may "poach" placements from other programs. Still, if school-to-work is to go to scale, more and stronger attempts must be made at marketing. A public education campaign is needed if school-to-work is not to die out as one more fad or attempt at reform that failed.

### **CONCLUSION: A NEW DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM**

Although employer recruitment requires a concerted effort, it is not an impossible task. We have found moderate to great success with regard to employer recruitment and retention. Of the programs we studied, some have had more difficulty recruiting students than employers, and those that have failed have not done so because of inadequate employer participation. Thus recruiting enough employers is not the salient problem. The main hurdle is getting all the various constituencies to buy into creating an integrated, quality school-to-work system. Employer participation cannot be studied or addressed in isolation from the questions of program structure, student demand, and parental acceptance. Most important, whether or not school-to-work can become universal and endure will depend on whether it is perceived as improving learning. Therefore, future research in this field should focus on the following issues.

### **School-to-Work Acceptance and Student Demand**

Too strong a focus on employers and their participation can lead to neglect of other components of the school-to-work model, and the other constituencies whose support is needed. Many program staff say that there is still a lack of knowledge of what school-to-work is, even among educators. While we find this to be the case, program staff compound the problem by using different terms, such as school-to-careers instead of school-to-work. The new programs in Rochester are called "New Visions" programs. And some of the new initiatives are based at regional vocational-technical centers, and so are assumed to be traditional vocational programs.

Certain groups were singled out in terms of blocking school-to-work progress. School counselors were repeatedly blamed for either not presenting school-to-work programs as options to students or for advising interested students not to enroll in them. Some teachers are also perceived to be barriers to reform. Program staff said that some teachers still believe that students are missing the "real work" of the classroom when they leave the school to go to a workplace.

Thus, programs can fail when not enough of an effort is made to win acceptance by teachers, counselors, students, and parents. Indeed, the lack of student (and parent) demand may be a larger problem for school-to-work programs than the recruiting and retaining of significant numbers of employers. This is an important finding, and one that should inform future research in this area.

### **Integration Between Work-Based and School-Based Learning**

Integration between academics and work-based learning, one of the aims of the school-to-work reform, is not occurring. In the majority of the programs we studied, work-based learning is simply tacked on to some part of the student's day or week while the rest remains unchanged. Even when new curriculum is developed, the classroom and the work-based portions still, in most cases, exist separately from each other. While the coursework at some schools includes general references to work and careers, students' experiences at their

workplaces are rarely discussed in the classroom.

Thus we see a neglect of the academic side of school-to-work, as well as few efforts to create the connecting activities called for in the school-to-work legislation. This is disturbing, particularly as researchers are coming to believe that the school-to-work approach may teach academic skills even better than traditional approaches. Bailey and Merritt (1997) have argued that the school-to-work strategy complements the "authentic teaching" or "learner-centered" approaches advocated by many innovative academic teachers. This goes to the question of the acceptance of school-to-work: if it is not seen as academically rigorous, parents and teachers will not support it, and it will fail.

### **Work-Based Learning and Attention to Quality**

While work-based education is presumed to be good for students, what and how they are meant to learn in the workplace is often not specifically addressed either in the design or the operation of the programs. Only some programs require learning or training plans to be agreed upon by all the parties involved; even fewer programs tailor these plans to individual students. Some program personnel neglect the specifics of work-based learning on the assumption that something will occur in the workplace that will be of value to the student, yet the lack of structure and oversight of work-based learning in some programs makes it difficult to see whether students' learning needs are being met. More research is needed on what actually occurs in the workplace; we need to understand if, what and how students are learning there.

Clearly, more quality control is needed. At some sites, staff answered questions about their program with the response, "Because the employers want it that way." While school-to-work staff put resources into determining the needs of local employers, few employers see their role as meeting students' needs. They do not see themselves as teachers. The quality of work-based learning and the career exploration function of school-to-work should not be sacrificed to supply employers with productive workers.

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