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Kirk Swortzel: kswortzel@ais.msstate.edu

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ENCOURAGING EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP AND OTHER WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Christine D. Bremer
Honeywell Inc.

Svjetlana Madzar
University of Minnesota

Authors' Note: Because we contributed equally to this paper, authorship is listed alphabetically.

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ABSTRACT

Young people planning to enter the workforce may derive considerable benefit from school-supervised work-based learning programs such as youth apprenticeship. While many educators recognize the value of such experience, few employers have seemed enthusiastic about becoming involved in such programs. It is proposed that employer involvement in school-to-work transition could be enhanced by innovations in both governmental and non-governmental policies and programs. It is suggested that several dimensions be kept in mind when designing incentives: type of workplace, policy level, government versus non-government, size of participating employers, motivations of business participants, and rewarding existing programs versus building paths to partnership. Policy recommendations are made regarding tax credits, federal funding through JTPA, use of labor market projections, general student assessment,

involvement of national business organizations, development of school and small business coalitions, and curriculum design.

ENCOURAGING EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP AND OTHER WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Many young people completing high school in the United States do not have immediate plans to attend college or to complete a four-year post-secondary degree. They are frequently ill-prepared for the world of work and drift from job to job until their late twenties (Apling, 1992; Bresnick, 1984). There have been numerous suggestions for assisting school-to-work transition. Many of these, but in particular youth apprenticeship, rely on the involvement of employers in providing work-based learning opportunities for high school students (S. H. Hamilton, 1990; Stern 1990). For purposes of this paper, youth apprenticeship is defined as a program that integrates school and workplace learning by emphasizing learning by doing under the tutelage of experts, and which addresses the personal and occupational development of young people.

The purpose of this paper is to (1) establish the value of employer involvement in helping youth prepare for jobs and careers; (2) offer some explanations for the general lack of employer involvement to date; (3) review issues and concerns related to tax credits and use of federal funds to encourage hiring and training of targeted individuals; and (4) suggest policies and programs which may be more effective in gaining employer involvement in youth apprenticeship and related programs.

What are the Benefits of Employer Involvement in School-to-Work Transition Programs?

Benefits to Students

How do students benefit from work-based learning experiences? It has been argued (Ashworth, Saxton & Buckle, 1989) that the following are principal motivators, from a teaching and learning perspective, of placing students in the workplace: (1) linking theory and practice; (2) gaining work experience generally, and within a particular function; (3) gaining personal insight -- including job preferences; (4) entering into a professional role; (5) gaining knowledge of the working of the particular organization; (6) acquiring knowledge and attitudes relevant to future learning; (7) exercising skills of thinking in a practical context; and (8) developing personal maturity. According to Knowles (1970), growth in personal maturity implies more autonomy, broader awareness, extended capacities, more ability to take on responsibilities, greater clarity of self in work role, more self acceptance, and greater tolerance for ambiguity. There is empirical evidence (Hopkins, J. R. Stone, Stern & McMillion, 1990) to support the contention that well-designed formal school-to-work transition programs can contribute to enhancing many of these factors. Stern, J. R. Stone, Hopkins, McMillion, and Cagampang (1992) compared typical teenage work experiences (with no connection to school) with school-supervised work experiences, concluding that school-supervised work better developed some of these crucial factors which contribute to adult success in the workplace.

These benefits were recognized by the United States Congress in enacting the [School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994](#). Section 102 of this Act specified means for providing meaningful work-based experiences for young people: "(1) a planned program of job training and experiences; (2) paid work experience; (3) workplace mentoring; (4) instruction in general workplace competencies; and (5) broad instruction in a variety of elements of an industry " (p. 3).

Benefits to the Nation's Economy

It is generally accepted that the United States has moved to an economy which requires higher levels of skill and knowledge. Low-skill manufacturing jobs have gone overseas, and there are fewer remaining employment options for untrained individuals.

According to [Northdurft and Jobs for the Future \(1990\)](#), the American economy will be in serious trouble if more attention is not paid to skills development:

The Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce recently surveyed several hundred American firms and 80 percent responded that they saw no deficiency in the education or skills

of their workers (apart from attitude, appearance, and related "work ethic" issues). The companies saw no skill shortage, the Commission concluded, because they don't require much of their workers. To cope with increasing international competition, these firms have responded by "dumbing down" the tasks workers do, hiring "contingent," or part-time workers in order to avoid paying fringe benefits, and thus competing by lowering wages....American firms must compete by producing *smarter*-- improving product quality more rapidly, introducing new products more frequently, and customizing products to meet the needs of narrow market niches. (p. 7)

Benefits to Employers

How do employers benefit from participating with schools in providing work-based learning opportunities? According to the [National Alliance of Business \(1992\)](#), employers who provide youth apprenticeship opportunities can expect to experience the following benefits:

- Obtain an expanded pool of qualified applicants
- Gain a direct chance to recruit and screen potential employees
- Evaluate potential employees in work settings prior to hiring
- Develop a quick, reliable source of skilled labor
- Meet contractual and legal obligations for affirmative action and equal employment
- Improve the quality of life and skills in the community
- Reduce turnover of entry-level employees
- Influence curriculum development to meet industry requirements (p.13)

[M. A. Hamilton and S. H. Hamilton \(1993\)](#) describe the learning process of an apprentice as follows: (1) attend coaching and mentoring; (2) try out in practice what is taught; (3) process learning to comprehend, apply and transform it; (4) produce, or get work done; (5) initiate learning by seeking out people who can teach and by noticing opportunities for learning; and (6) reflect on work experiences. It can thus be argued that, through mentor involvement and observation of and exposure to the apprentice learning process, employees and organizations may recognize that the improved training and development efforts represent an investment in learning for the entire workforce in the organization. Initial observations of a youth apprenticeship program in Broome County, New York add to our belief that youth apprenticeship brings in tools and examples for human resource development. Starting in the sixth month of that program's existence, employees were demanding to receive the same type of training and cross-training that was provided to apprentices ([S. H. Hamilton, 1993](#)). Similar initial findings in a recent study of six youth apprenticeship sites by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) also support this conclusion ([J. R. Stone, Madzar, Cagampang and Smith, in press](#)).

Why is There a Lack of Employer Involvement?

A number of recent articles and reports suggest that employers have several reasons for reluctance regarding youth apprenticeship and related work-based training programs.

Many Employers Don't Believe They Need More High-Skill Workers

In an article published in the Harvard Business Review, [N. Stone \(1991\)](#) discusses the perceptions of employers which were revealed in a report by the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. She reports that while many employers complain about the quality of job applicants, only five percent of employers expected education and skill requirements to rise. Further, only 15 percent of employers reported that they had difficulty finding appropriately-skilled workers. These employers were primarily in craft-apprentice trades and traditionally female-dominated occupations like nursing and secretarial work. "The skills more than 80 percent of employers worried about were not academic but social -- a good work ethic, a pleasant demeanor, reliability" (p. 52). Discussions of high skill workplaces tend to center around technical and problem-solving skills, not social skills. Few employers are likely to have much interest in attempting to teach social skills to young people. Similarly, employers do not wish to raise expectations about the

availability of jobs by providing technical training unless there is a clear need for additional employees.

Many Employers Who are Hiring Can Get Well-Qualified Adults

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article ([Templin, 1994](#)) on the recent growth in hiring at United States auto plants. These companies are using sophisticated screening techniques to select the best from among thousands of applicants. They are hiring college graduates and MBAs. At one Chrysler plant, twenty-six percent of workers on the third shift have college degrees. Now, for the first time, the third shift has better attendance than the first shift, which has less educated, longer-tenure workers.

Training May Not Get us the High-Skill High-Wage Economy That's Been Promised

Many economists, politicians, and others envision a high-skill, high-wage economy. The key, we are told, is training ([Reich, 1994](#)). But not everyone agrees that this is a realistic picture. An article in *The Economist*, a generally conservative British publication ([O brave new world, 1994](#)), claims that the vision of a high skills, high wage economy is just a pipedream, promoted because it is in the best interest of almost everyone --from union members to free-traders to educators. According to this article, the real problem underlying employment problems isn't training:

Above all, the pro-training camp hugely overstates the ability of training to curb long-term unemployment. For a growing number of people, particularly in the United States, the real problem is not a lack of job-specific skills but a surplus of social pathologies--too many people with too little self-discipline, self-respect, and basic education to fit easily into any workplace. (p. 20)

The Current System Looks Okay to Many

Not all are dissatisfied with the existing U.S. educational system. According to the above- mentioned article in *The Economist* ([O brave new world, 1994](#)):

The training system which seems to be coping best with technological innovation and global competition is the most maligned of the lot, the American one. The standard criticisms of this system, about poaching, short-termism and amateurism, have always been overstated. Sensible workers do not leave firms with good training records for fly-by-night operations just because they are offered a few dollars more. Successful firms take a long-term view of the skills of their workforces, even if they are subject to relentless hounding...to produce profits. Thanks to the pressure of competition, American plumbers, electricians and pest controllers are usually as competent as their certificate-toting counterparts in Germany.

Indeed, the American tradition of providing people with masses of general academic education, including a start at university for half the population and plenty of second chances for everyone, and leaving specific training to the market, is becoming more, rather than less, relevant. Economists have long argued that the returns on general education are higher than those on specific training, because education is transferable whereas many skills tend to be job-specific...The most urgent task facing the United States is to reform its highly uneven school system (perhaps through rigorous national exams) rather than to re- invent an apprenticeship system. (p. 26)

Again, if business leaders and other employers are sympathetic to this view, it is hard to imagine what it would take to get them involved in youth apprenticeship.

Employers are Asked to Foot the Bill and Guarantee Jobs

Employers who provide in-house training programs for employees know that these services are expensive. Many feel unable to provide sufficient training for current employees, much less teenagers from the neighborhood high school. But when they read about youth apprenticeship programs, they are likely to notice who is paying most of the bill in these programs.

PASS, a program for disadvantaged youth in New Jersey ([Himmelman, 1992](#)) recruited the participation of

a bank as a means of fulfilling the requirements placed on banks as part of the Community Reinvestment Act. In this program, students are offered the incentive of a job in the bank with advancement potential if they attend school regularly, meet with their career mentors as planned, and maintain a C average. Himmelman praises this program for its accomplishments. However, it does not seem likely that there are more than a few employers who will want to reserve desirable jobs for students who do little more than earn Cs and show up for appointments. If other employers in New Jersey are watching the PASS program (which is not a youth apprenticeship program), they may come to the conclusion that schools have very low expectations of their students and very high expectations of employers. They may well avoid becoming involved when school districts call about youth apprenticeship.

Union Opposition May Scare Off Some Employers

Union opposition was a significant barrier to corporate involvement in the planning of a youth apprenticeship program in Pennsylvania (Kazis, 1991), even for those most dedicated to seeing youth apprenticeship happen:

Within organized labor at the national level, there has been significant hostility to the concept of youth apprenticeship, which is seen as a threat to union influence in the nation's apprenticeship system. In Pennsylvania, PYAP [Pennsylvania Youth Apprenticeship Program] encountered some of that sentiment from the state AFL-CIO. More significant, though, was the resistance of local unions in large metalworking shops that might have become key program participants. For example, at Caterpillar in York, the Vice President of Human Relations was a member of the feasibility study team and an active supporter of the program. He knew, however, that his union was skeptical and that the firm's participation would have to be put on the bargaining table in the next contract negotiation. Caterpillar, therefore, could not promise participation. This was true of key union shops in other sites. As a result, the firms that could commit early were non-union and generally smaller firms, giving PYAP the appearance of being a non-union program, further fueling union skepticism. (p. 23)

Employers See That Their Motives are not Trusted

In *Voices from School and Home: Wisconsin Parents and Students Focus on Youth Apprenticeship* (Jobs for the Future, 1992), parent concerns about businesses' role in youth apprenticeship were described:

A few parents expressed concern about the motivations of employers who were interested in participating in a youth apprenticeship. Some parents believed that employers would use the apprentice training positions to access "cheap, minimum-wage high school students" to displace adult workers. (p. 24)

While the parents with suspicious or negative views were not the majority, they were vocal and had potential for creating a public controversy over youth apprenticeship. Parents also believed quite strongly that the employment community was not ready to fully participate in a youth apprenticeship effort. "The parents were both skeptical and pessimistic that enough 'good' employers could be involved in youth apprenticeship to make the program a significantly better learning opportunity" (p. 18).

Existing Youth Apprenticeship Programs Appear to do Little to Address Toughest Social Problems

Adelman (1993) looked at several youth apprenticeship programs and found that 70 percent of the students involved were young women, and almost all the students had good school records prior to apprenticeships. The programs he reviewed were the largest ones of which he was aware; together they employed 115 youth apprentices. Adelman argues that most of the young people currently involved in youth apprenticeships would probably have done okay without them. If employers believe this, economic self-interest, not community responsibility, will drive employer involvement.

Employers May See No Payback on Their Investment

High school students in the U.S., unlike their German counterparts, are not accustomed to the idea of committing to careers at early ages. A student interviewed about youth apprenticeship in Pennsylvania

exemplifies this difficulty:

What you're talking about sounds really good, it really does. But the employer would have to commit himself to instructing you. That means the employee is also committing himself. Say Chevrolet says, "We're going to put you through this program. You have to work for us for four years,"...Sorry, maybe I don't want to work for them for four years...What am I supposed to do now? (Kallick and Jobs for the Future 1990, p. 27).

To the degree that other students might have similar attitudes, it becomes difficult to make a case for economic self-interest as a driver of employer involvement in youth apprenticeship.

Does the U.S. Need a National Program or Policy to Promote Youth Apprenticeship?

Bresnick (1984) argues that a national approach is needed, despite the likelihood of resistance to such a proposal. Bresnick says: "American pragmatism resists comprehensive approaches. We are skeptical of guarantees, whether to youth or otherwise, but the need to confront the situation of our youth anew should be evident" (p.103). Bresnick believes the situation should not be left to the vagaries of local initiative:

The program must be developed on a national basis. While allowance must be made for regional and local variation, the broad outlines of the policy must be agreed to in a national forum and be supported by the major national employer and trade union associations. All businesses must accept a financial obligation to support their share of the program...The main focus of the program is to create large numbers of trainee positions in the major employing institutions in our society for young people between the ages of 16 and 19. (p. 133)

Government Efforts to Encourage Employer Involvement

Most authors and policy makers argue that incentives are necessary to attraction of sufficient numbers of employers to school-to-work transition programs (Apling, 1992). The Targeted Jobs Tax Credit is typical of federal efforts to influence hiring of young or disadvantaged people. In order to claim a credit, an employer had to increase total employment by at least two percent for the period to which the credit was applied. Diverse population groups were covered by this program, among them economically disadvantaged youth, ex-offenders, and Vietnam veterans. An eligible person would receive a voucher and present it to an employer as proof that the employer could get a credit if they hired him or her. It is obvious that this policy has targeted disadvantaged populations, and it has certainly been labeled as such in the business community. Thus, some proponents of youth apprenticeship fear that, given a broader tax credit policy, businesses may associate youth apprenticeship programs with subsidies (S. H. Hamilton, 1990). Such stereotyping could prevent them from looking at the benefits of participation and turn them into participants from a sense of civic responsibility. This alone will not encourage large-scale participation.

How Well Have Incentives Worked in the Past?

The Targeted Jobs Tax Credit has not been successful and has never evoked enthusiastic response from the business community. In an exploratory study of government incentive programs, Corbett, Masters, and Moran (1981) looked at underlying reasons for lack of success. Many valuable lessons may be learned from their findings.

Corbett et al. (1981) found that the proportion of new hires in which the tax credit actually influenced hiring was discouragingly low. The overall conclusion was that the subsidies were "at best underutilized and at worst not very effective" (p. 36). In short, very few employers reported that tax credits were a sufficient incentive to change their normal hiring practices to employ less qualified candidates. These results largely support the Ball, Wolfhager, Gerould and Solnick (1981) findings on the effectiveness of the Youth Entitlement Demonstration Program.

The following were shown to be underlying reasons for the ineffectiveness of such government incentive programs:

1. Attitudinal problems on the part of businesses, counselors and potential workers are a common barrier.

Employers were found to have negative perceptions about government in general, and targeted tax credits in particular. Some employers stated that the tax credit was inconsistent with affirmative action, and even inconsistent with other guidelines coming from the government. Particularly strong was their negative attitude toward the paperwork involved. One employer said: "If I hire them and then it doesn't work out and I fire them, am I going to have to fill out another 32 more forms on why?" (p. 46). Another employer said: "It's my business. I built it. Why should I have to explain myself to the government?" (p. 46). Led in their reasoning by economic self-interest and free market principles, employers viewed tax credits as artificial incentives that ultimately prevented people from competing in the labor market. Along similar lines, placement counselors felt that inappropriate placements might jeopardize their future relations with employers, and were wary of readily recommending the programs to their clients. Finally, eligible individuals occasionally felt awkward admitting their subsidized status. They were afraid it might label them as being less productive, which in turn could diminish their future job opportunities.

2. Design problems were made evident by cases in which it was clear that the amount and/or duration of credit programs were insufficient to induce employer participation. Another difficulty was that the program was not seen as producing sufficiently visible or immediate benefits. Also, since responsibility for these particular programs was distributed among several agencies, many employers reported uneven implementation.
3. Marketing of the programs appeared to be insufficient. The researchers found high overall ignorance of existing programs, and concluded that the business community lacked familiarity with the programs. Similar findings were reported in other studies (Bishop, 1981; Gottschalk, 1983). Lack of knowledge about the programs was also reported by counselors. Written comments indicated that staff training in program operation was insufficient.

In a study of outcomes in Maryland and Missouri, [Lorenz \(1988\)](#) criticized the effectiveness of the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit, stating that "it appears the credit has not significantly changed employer hiring policies but rather has led to random substitution of eligible workers for non-eligibles in the low-wage labor market" (p. 79). Lorenz also concluded that the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit had only "modest short-term effects upon the earnings of eligible workers" (p. 79).

Incentives as Discussed in the Literature on Youth Apprenticeship

Although acknowledging the importance of incentives for the business community to get involved in youth apprenticeship programs, most authors take a surprisingly simplistic approach to the issues of appropriate choice of incentives. Their analyses remain at a very general level, hardly giving direction regarding how to proceed with incentives (e.g. [Apling, 1992](#); [Bailey, 1993](#); [S. H. Hamilton 1990](#)). In spite of its importance this concern has not yet been fully articulated as an issue among scholars of youth apprenticeship.

The general concerns that have been raised are legitimate, and they revolve around the following problems:

1. In accordance with our conclusions regarding some government programs, [Apling \(1992\)](#) also noted that tax credits may attract some employers for the wrong reasons. Reducing tax liability may be a primary concern, and training apprentices may be secondary.
2. Legislated training subsidies are at risk of antagonizing older workers, as well as unions ([Bailey, 1993](#)). The reluctance from within may lead to subsequent rejection of the program.
3. Some discussions have focused around the *free rider* problem ([Bresnick, 1984](#)). Taking into account the mobility of the labor market, youth trained in one company can easily leave for another, leaving behind them unfulfilled government promises of long-term benefits to the company that initially hired them as apprentices.
4. Finally, everyone understands that if the government offers tax credit programs, it will be necessary to

impose additional taxes elsewhere or reduce funding for other programs. It is important that these tradeoffs be clarified and fully considered.

In a statement made in response to requests for public comment regarding state grants for School-To-Work Opportunities efforts, it was mentioned that there is "no real incentive for employers, particularly small businesses, to spend their limited funds on hiring students." The response from the Secretaries of Education and Labor claims that there are "many existing vehicles," but mentions only "Targeted Jobs Tax Credits, of which employers can avail themselves in the context of their involvement as partners in their States' School-to-Work Opportunities programs." ([U.S. Department of Education and Department of Labor, 1994](#), p. 5282). The Secretaries' reply goes on to point out that it may be possible in many cases to use Jobs Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) funds to pay for work-based activities (including the training of mentors) for economically disadvantaged students.

Policy Recommendations

In order to take advantage of the full potential of business participation in school-to-work transition efforts, it is important to devise an incentives program built on mutual partnership and existing possibilities. A comprehensive incentives package should be designed by taking into account the following dimensions:

1. Type of workplace: [The Minnesota Department of Education \(1994\)](#) and [J. R. Stone and Madzar \(1994\)](#) offer a useful classification of the types of impact workplaces may have in the community: (1) high skill, high wage; (2) community building; and (3) capacity building. While the definition of high skill, high wage occupation has proven elusive, it has been operationalized as any job that pays at least double the minimum wage. A community building workplace is described as one in which schools become an economic engine for local communities. It is based on supporting the process of community building and meeting local needs for job skills. Finally, building on Stone and Madzar's conceptualization, the capacity building workplace can be viewed as a workplace that helps improve the quality of the existing workforce in the process of participation in the school-to-work transition programs.
2. Policy level: This dimension addresses the issue of who should be the primary initiator of the incentive system: national, state, or local entities. It seems apparent that in some cases two or more levels of coordination will be needed.
3. Government versus non-government: Government involvement may not always be necessary: incentives originating from non-governmental institutions and organizations may also prove to be effective.
4. Size of business participants: It is often important to differentiate between the needs of small businesses and larger corporations as well as to distinguish among their capacities to engage in effective partnerships. Incentives need to be designed in such a way as to address these differences.
5. Motivation of business participants. Employers can have widely varying reasons for their interest in school-to-work transition programs. Some may have existing or projected near-term labor shortages in certain skill areas which may inspire interest in intensive work-based learning programs. An organization interested in improved community relations may wish, at least initially, to participate in programs able to involve large numbers of students, such as career fairs or job shadowing. If interested in social service or social change, a program involving disadvantaged students might be most appealing. If a desire to participate in education reform is the driver, a company may be drawn to working on curriculum development or legislative advocacy.
6. Rewarding existing programs versus building paths to partnerships: Some of the incentives that are recommended above address the need to reward the businesses that are already involved in youth apprenticeship and other school-to-work transition programs, but incentives are also needed to encourage employers to learn from their past or current experiences working with youth, and to

support gradual involvement in the process, not necessarily in programs as intensive as youth apprenticeship.

With these discussions in mind, several types of employer incentives and means of implementation are worthy of consideration.

Tax Credits

Tax credits should be made available in the form of vouchers that the employer will receive for participation in a youth apprenticeship or Tech Prep program. These programs would be certified by a state council on Education and Employment Transitions (as exists in Minnesota, for example) or other similar body. The vouchers will be used toward education and training of existing employees (i.e. other than the students or apprentices) in public post-secondary institutions. In this way, some of the problems that have so far limited the success of tax credits, such as perceived discrimination against existing workers, should be diminished. Also, this incentive represents an immediate benefit, visible to all members of the business organization. It can encompass small businesses and corporations alike. It is important that the paperwork be user-friendly and that the procedure be uniform for all included programs. These kinds of statewide efforts have the potential to be models for national government-supported incentives. Education vouchers can be used for capacity building of the participating workplaces as well as contributing to workforce development. Improved skills, higher wages, and enhanced job security ought to follow.

To implement a tax credit education voucher system, government entities would need to define eligible programs and participants, determine the basis for credit (such as hours of employment or wages paid to students), and develop a formula for determining the tax credit. Some private post-secondary institutions may be willing to honor the vouchers on a credit-for-credit basis; this should be considered where economically viable in order to broaden the educational opportunities available to voucher users. At the same time, employers would need to develop a means of distributing voucher benefits to interested employees.

Jobs Training and Partnership Act (JTPA)

The existing system of JTPA grants are representative of a national, government-supported program that has been used to help economically disadvantaged students. Their use for mentor training in the businesses that participate in youth-apprenticeship-like programs is recommended. There is evidence that this policy has worked well in smaller communities ([J.R. Stone et al., in press](#)). Both small businesses and corporations can benefit from these grants. This incentive is helpful in capacity building of the workforce through mentor training, as well as for community building because it enables businesses to help the needy in the community.

Labor Market Projections

The government, both at the Federal and the state level, should be very active in informing all business communities and schools about current labor market trends and projections. These should be continually updated and in sufficient detail to be of practical use. Non-governmental forecasting agencies can also be of help. This initiative should prevent schools and businesses from training students in skills which are soon to be obsolete. With the substantive information about future demands, businesses should target jobs with labor shortages for youth apprenticeship, for mutual benefit. This strategy may lead to high-skill high-wage jobs for young people as they find interest in and opportunity for further development.

General Student Assessment

It is important to reinforce the use of existing assessment tools such as student report cards. Employers can reinforce schools' emphasis on academic achievement by asking to see grades, test scores, or portfolios of young job applicants. Also important for the long term success of these programs is to set clear skill standards that young people need to meet before they are accepted for participation in formal work-based learning programs. If businesses are included in devising standards for student assessment, they will feel less reluctant to employ young people. Such assessment should be particularly helpful for high-skill high-wage workplaces. Also, assessment should help to increase the capacity of the workforce in the long run by promoting higher levels of skill and knowledge development.

Involvement of National Business Organizations

National, non-governmental business organizations such as the Business Roundtable, the National Alliance of Business or the Conference Board should be heavily involved in encouraging small business participation in building local coalitions. These organizations could contribute by publishing handbooks in which work-based learning and various forms of youth employment and training are described in detail. Rewards or certifications may be put in place and awarded to those employers of youth who, by some set of standards, are acting as responsible employers committed to teaching transferable skills to the youth they employ. These initiatives will contribute not only to community building, but also to the long-term development of the workforce (i.e. capacity building).

School and Small Business Coalitions

Individual schools and school districts can encourage business involvement by establishing closer ties with local small businesses through organizations such as the Rotary Club or Chamber of Commerce. Schools should consider organizing seminars for small business mentors, or even owners, where they will address management issues specific to youth (who they are, what they like, cultural and communication issues, etc.). Schools should also investigate where their students are currently working, and then target those employers for mentor training. In these partnerships, businesses should also count on being able to contact the school to get help for a student in an area of deficiency. A national membership organization with local affiliates, similar in concept to the Better Business Bureau, could be instituted to create a vehicle through which employers of youth can express their commitment to helping students learn transferable work skills and to provide employment under conditions which are likely to enhance rather than detract from the student's overall education. This organization would provide information and support for employers, and would help members gain positive publicity in return for their participation. These and similar coalitions would help by building on existing potentials, rather than abruptly involving employers in what has often been described as a perilous journey. It is more realistic to expect that committed partnerships will emerge from these well-founded relationships. Such strategies will help in workforce development as well as in establishing a missing link between schools and small businesses in the process of community building.

Curriculum Design

Finally, existing efforts in joint curriculum design between schools and employers should be reinforced. This will require schools to welcome employer input to a degree that has not been common in the past. Educators and employers may be surprised at the degree to which they agree on curriculum priorities. Open communication between educators and employers is the only way to substantially ensure that real work-based learning will take place. Working together on curriculum design can be expected to build important bridges on the path to long-term partnerships.

Summary

Involving employers in youth apprenticeship and other school-to-work transition programs for young people will require a multi-faceted approach which takes into account the abilities and short-term interests of employers, and which offers paths of involvement entailing graduated levels of commitment. If successful, many more employers will become active, committed partners in educating youth for employment.

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