

# EMPLOYABILITY TRANSFER

## PROACTIVE CAREER PLANNING



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**BY ELAINE METCALF**

**W**ith high school dropout rates at about 30 percent nationwide and an anticipated severe workforce shortage as baby boomers retire, now is the time to engage future workers. Educators must encourage high school students to be proactive career planners. Today's high school students will fuel the

workforce pipeline with educated, skilled workers who are ready to fill quality, high-paying jobs in industries such as health care, manufacturing, technology and engineering.

The Lee's Summit R-7 School District, located in suburban Kansas City, is a large district of 17,400 students that is committed to raising the priority

of career planning for students. Teachers and counselors commit instructional time to career planning so that all students explore occupational interests and learn some of the skills, tools and attitudes they will need to achieve success in their work lives. Enormous rewards can be gained by students who become proactive career planners. Proactive career planning

# SCRIPTS:

means R-7 students will take classes centered on a career cluster or occupational field, gaining a better perspective of what people who work in those fields actually do. It also means parents might save some much needed college dollars because students are immersed in a career area in high school as opposed to college. It is this immersion that helps the student decide whether or not to enter a chosen career area. Isn't it better to learn some of these lessons at the high school level as opposed to paying for these lessons at the collegiate level? The cost to parents of an additional year of college can be significant. The College Board estimates that the average annual cost to attend a public college in 2009 was \$15,213; therefore, college time spent "exploring" careers carries a hefty price tag.

## Establishing the Need for Employability Transcripts

About 10 years ago, the school district reorganized its typical career education advisory committees around the theme of the six career paths: arts and communication; business management

and technology; human services; health services; industrial engineering technology; and natural resources and agriculture. The school district partnered with the economic development council and the chamber of commerce to establish membership on the newly created Lee's Summit R-7 Career Pathway Teams.

Team membership consisted of community leaders, school leaders, counselors and teachers from both academic and career and technical education (CTE) areas. The Lee's Summit Economic Development Council provided statistical information on the workforce skill gaps identified through a survey of local businesses. The advisory teams spent time looking at employment in the Kansas City region using MERIC (Missouri Economic Research and Information Center).

Specifically, the teams looked at a Career Guide Index, which equally weights three variables—average wages, total openings over a 10-year period, and percent of change over a 10-year period. A combination of scores for any of the three variables defines an occupation's Career Grade. For example, Grade A

careers have the best outlook with above average growth rates, number of openings and average wages compared to all occupations in the region. According to the MERIC Web site, there are more than 34,000 projected Grade A openings in the Kansas City region. It was this kind of data that piqued the interest of the pathway team members.

After much analysis of the statistics, it was shockingly apparent that the Lee's Summit community needed to do more to ensure that graduates were both college and career ready. Over the past 10 years, a series of Lee's Summit R-7 Career Pathway Team meetings led to some innovative initiatives within the school system and in the community. The district has implemented employability transcripts along with focused learning as part of the school district's proactive career planning process.

Employability transcripts differ from academic transcripts. Academic transcripts merely show accomplishments such as grades earned, grade point average and class rank. The district will continue to offer academic transcripts, which are primarily used when students apply to colleges and universities, while employability transcripts help high school students compete for jobs, apply for scholarships and prepare for the transition from school to career. The employability transcript emphasizes:

- career preparedness through selection of an area of focus
- dependability through record of attendance in school
- academic skills stated in occupational terms via workplace readiness assessment scores
- supervised internship participation, completing one of the seven internship programs available to students
- technical skill attainment through national certifications earned or assessments passed





▲ Students from Summit International Studies Academy, located in Summit Technology Academy, work together on a collaborative class project.



▲ Information Technology (IT) students in the Lee's Summit School District get hands-on experience in their chosen career field by networking computers.

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The transcript program was developed as part of the district's emphasis on connecting each student to the future and the council's plea for a skilled and ready workforce. Local business owners or human resource managers can request that students provide an employability transcript as part of the employment process. Similarly to academic transcripts, a student can personally receive an unofficial copy of the transcript, or an official copy can be mailed directly to the prospective employer.

## Developing Employability Transcripts

An employability transcript is a validation of credentials. Unlike a certificate that is a one-time credential that is

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earned, a transcript outlines a process of accumulating skills or traits that help the student develop marketable skills. For example, one category on the employability transcript is participation in internships. Proactive career planners can use part-time employment experiences to build important 21st century skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving, oral and written communication. Students will practice these skills through their internship job and gain a head start in enhancing their credentials.

Perkins IV legislation requires that all completers show technical skill attainment. The employability transcript is the perfect avenue to validate the certifications earned and national assessments passed. CTE teachers remind students early and often of the importance of doing well on the technical skill assessment. Placing a passed test code on the employability transcript gives the student credibility.

## Focused Learning

To further emphasize proactive career planning the district implemented a focused learning initiative. Focused learning is a plan of study that helps students combine regular core coursework with targeted electives to make their high school

experience more rewarding and relevant. Through this emphasis on focused learning, students are encouraged to earn four related units of study in one of 37 areas of focus. Students may complete coursework in more than one area of focus or take additional coursework within a focus to deepen their knowledge in a specific career path. Students may also change their focus if they find a new area of interest. In fact, it is expected that as students experience new courses they may change their area of focus. The flexibility is what sets this initiative apart from other model career immersion programs. Parents, staff and administrators did not want students to feel locked into an area of study. Yet it is this proactive career planning process that makes a big difference in achieving the goals of the focused learning initiative.

Focused learning was developed using the career clusters model and courses available to R-7 students. Beginning in the eighth grade, students use Missouri Connections, a Web-based program free to all Missouri students, to develop a personal plan of study. Missouri Connections ([missouriconnections.org](http://missouriconnections.org)) has a planning tool whereby students drag and drop specific courses to develop a plan of course completion that will fulfill high school graduation requirements, in addition to an area of focus. Students revisit this plan of study each year to update it as needed. Parents can also view their child's personal plan online.

In the sophomore year, students officially declare an area of focus. The district's career exploration teacher



works collaboratively with the guidance counselors and core course teachers to design a lesson that integrates academic skills with an area of focus. Students complete a declaration form by indicating one of the 37 specified areas of focus. This information is entered into the district's student management system for easy access by counselors, academic advisers and administrators. For example, with just a few clicks, a counselor can tell how many credits a student has earned towards his or her chosen area of focus.

As the process of declaring an area of focus unfolded, it became evident that all educators must be career educators in order to engage each student and to provide interventions if a student needs help finding a career path that is interesting and fulfilling. For some students, declaring an area of focus comes easily; but for others, they need more one-on-one support to review the process of matching their interests with their abilities.

Teachers who serve as academic coaches or advisers play a huge role in setting the tone of focused learning within the classroom. The mere learning of material for the sake of preparing for the next course or next test is detrimental to students. Students who feel connected to something will stay in school. Some students are naturally connected because they are involved in activities such as sports, plays, clubs or scholar programs. But what about the student who is not involved in one of these activities? R-7 staff members believe that each student should feel a sense of belonging while in high school; thus, declaring an area of focus connects them to a group of students with similar career interests.

### A Winning Idea

Each student deserves to graduate with an earned area of focus and an employability transcript in order to equip him or her for the next step of postsecondary education, training, entry into the military, or employment. It is this team effort and

proactive approach that ensures graduates are both college and career ready. Without a doubt, it is a school district's and community's responsibility to work collaboratively to make career planning a high priority. **I**

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