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School to Work Promise and Effectiveness

The 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) has stimulated educational initiatives that are intended to improve two important outcomes for youth: learning and successful career entry. Since the passage of the STWOA, states and localities have been piecing together initiatives that adhere to broad school-to-work (STW) concepts for learning and career development and are tailored to local strengths, resources, and needs. We are beginning to look at data from national and state sources that reflect the early impact and effectiveness of STW activities.

The Promise: Intent of the STWOA

The STWOA provides funds for activities that are classified as work-based learning, school-based learning, or connecting activities. Work-based learning activities use the context of the workplace to facilitate learning and retention of skills and knowledge. School-based learning components are intended to better prepare youth for successful careers: career awareness and exploration activities for elementary and middle-school students, rigorous programs of instruction that integrate academic and vocational learning, and career pathways that lead through appropriate secondary course work and that facilitate entry into additional training or postsecondary education. Connecting activities are infrastructural investments that bring together employers and students.

On the surface, it appears as though the sole intent of the STWOA is to promote career preparation. The school-based learning components are targeted on career awareness, exploration, and preparation, and the work-based learning components provide firsthand views of work. In fact, an explicit stipulation of the STWOA is that work-based learning experiences must introduce students to all aspects of the industry, the rationale being that career choices will be better informed if students participate or observe workers in many different occupations. Yet deeper analysis suggests that, while career preparation is an important objective of the legislation, the STWOA has at least three other purposes.

First, there is a pedagogical goal. Work-based learning is a teaching method that presents students with "real world" application of concepts. Retention and understanding are promoted through hands-on instruction in an immediate context. Proponents of STW cite research by cognitive psychologists suggesting that most learners fare better with a contextualized, hands-on teaching approach than with the traditional lecture and textbook approach. Note, however, that this pedagogical benefit occurs only if the work-based learning experience is well coordinated with the classroom.

Second, the STWOA fosters collaboration between education and employers. In many states, governance of STW initiatives involves councils or boards that must be numerically dominated by private-sector employers. Work-based learning activities must be developed jointly by educators and employers. Furthermore, an entire class of fundable activities, the connecting activities, involves collaboration.

Third, it may be argued that the STWOA is intended to be a catalyst in restructuring education. The Act promotes the development and use of a curriculum that integrates vocational and academic skills. Some districts are finding that broad career clusters are a natural mechanism for achieving that integration. Furthermore, STW concepts begin to depart from schools' traditional physical locations and use of time. Work-based learning takes place off site and relies on workplace mentors for instructional support. Emphases on certification and national skills standards move toward using whatever time is necessary to achieve skill competencies rather than fixed amounts of time that may or may not be sufficient to achieve competence.

In short, the promise of school-to-work activities lie in the following benefits:

- Enhanced career preparation of youth
- Enhanced learning through hands-on, contextualized instruction
- Increased collaboration between education and employers
- Restructured curricula

Delivery: Early Implementation Falls Short of the Promise

This article draws on three sources. The STWOA requires the National School-to-Work Office to undertake a national evaluation and to maintain a national performance measurement system, called the Progress Measures Chart. Both of these functions are being conducted by outside research organizations, and early publications are from Hershey et al. (1997) and Medrich et al. (1996). States that have received funding are also conducting evaluations. The third source is Hollenbeck et al. (1997), a report documenting the Upjohn Institute's evaluation of STW initiatives in Michigan.

Four observations summarize what has been learned to date. First, individual states are taking quite different approaches in their implementation. Some states are focusing on one or a few specific activities; for example, Wisconsin has emphasized youth apprenticeships. Other states are following a less-targeted approach: Michigan is following a highly decentralized model that funds activities designed and proposed by local partnerships within the general framework of the STWOA. Still other states have used STW funds to leverage broad educational restructuring. Oregon is generally acknowledged to have the most ambitious restructuring, adopting statewide certificates of initial and advanced mastery, for example.

The second observation is that the progress made by local programs in implementing STW concepts has been concentrated in career awareness activities such as job-shadowing. Career exploration and guidance have existed in middle and secondary schools for many years, but evidence suggests that the STW movement has greatly broadened the number of students engaged

in and the time spent on career exploration, awareness, and preparation. Over two-thirds of U.S. high schools offer a job-shadowing or mentoring program. The Upjohn Institute evaluation has confirmed the extensive amount of time and energy being invested in job-shadowing experiences and job fairs. The "flipside" to this emphasis on career activities is that work-based learning and curriculum restructuring efforts are not occurring widely. In a few instances, localities are undertaking major initiatives that show promise, but all in all, we can describe the educational reform attributable to STW to date as marginal at best.

Of course, change for the sake of change should not be the goal. This brings me to the third observation, the importance of the quality dimension of STW programs and the extent to which it varies. Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) point out that work-based learning can be seriously mishandled without appropriate attention to detail. Appropriate learning objectives, sequencing, assessment, and coordination with classroom activities all require careful planning and execution, for example. These authors state, "Simply placing young people in workplaces does not guarantee that they will learn" (p. 682). Career exploration activities such as job shadowing also require structure and planning in order to be beneficial. Hollenbeck et al. (1997) report job-shadowing activities that ranged from unstructured "visits" to the workplace of a family friend or relative with no follow-up, to programs in which students conducted research about an occupation, prepared questions for a visit with an individual engaged in that occupation, and wrote a short paper describing the experience.

The final observation is that achieving the promise of the STWOA requires leadership and investments in professional development. In our analyses of Michigan activities, there was virtually a one-to-one mapping between exemplary activities and an extraordinary administrator or teacher who believed in the vision of STW and was willing to take the risks necessary to achieve the full benefits. Furthermore, almost all individuals we interviewed strongly emphasized the need to offer professional development activities on subjects such as curriculum integration, youth development, and contextualized learning.

Sustainability: Will STW Initiatives Deliver Fully on the Promise?

The STWOA has been around for only a little over three years, so it is not surprising that it has not achieved its full potential. However, the Act is scheduled to terminate in 2001, so it has only about three more years to achieve its goals. What will be its legacy?

The STW movement has aroused controversy and political opposition. One controversy has arisen over the term "school-to-work" and over the assertion that STW should lead to "career majors for all students." For many parents and students, school-to-work connotes job training or vocational education and is perceived to be inconsistent with postsecondary education. However, the STWOA clearly addresses this concern by calling for school-based learning that is rigorous and that leads to career preparation pathways that include postsecondary education. STW program administrators are frustrated by the misperception and are actively marketing the potential of their initiatives to lead to college. Further, many STW initiatives have changed their name; the most common title now is "school-to-careers."

In a second controversy, opponents are concerned that, if STW is fully implemented, schools will track all students into a career choice at an early age and that too much instructional time will be invested in career preparation. The STWOA does include language about "career majors" and about "all students." STW administrators indicate, however, that career majors are broad clusters of related occupations and that a hallmark of a good program is flexibility that allows students to move in and out of clusters as their interests change. Further, proponents note that the use of the phrase "all students" is to assure inclusivity: all students will have the opportunity to participate in STW activities if they so choose.

Beyond these issues, which are partly semantic but also partly philosophic, the question remains of the sustainability and promise of STW. Program performance data suggest that progress has been made, particularly in career development activities. However evidence also suggests that the sustainability of STW may hinge on instituting and maintaining quality standards for all activities and on adequate investment in leadership and professional development.

A glaring omission from the evidence to date is the effect of school-to-work on student achievement. The pedagogical and educational restructuring benefits of STW only have value if they favorably affect student achievement. Without solid analytical evidence, policy makers and parents will have to base decisions about the involvement of young people in STW activities on tradition and beliefs.

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Works Cited

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