

Findings



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JobReady in North Carolina

Pathways to Career Success or Failure?

By Cheri M. Jimenez



With rapid growth and emerging industry in North Carolina, Governor James B. Hunt Jr. has made workforce development a top priority in order “to provide all

students with a strong foundation of academic and technical skills that will prepare them for successful careers and a lifetime of learning.”¹ That means that students will not only need to master the three traditional R’s – reading, writing and arithmetic, but a fourth fundamental – workforce readiness.

Is North Carolina redefining academic education, kindergarten through college, where preparation and readiness for work is mandatory? Undoubtedly, converting the public education system into a workforce preparation system raises several critical public policy issues. This paper will examine the paradigm shift in the focus of education and the policy issues at stake.

School-to-Work Background

The School-to-Work (STW) Opportunities Act was one of three pieces of education legislation pushed through Congress by President Clinton’s administration and signed into law.² The second piece was the Goals 2000: Educate America Act³ which uses goals to develop and implement education reforms aimed at helping students master academic and occupational skill standards. Lastly, the National Skill Standards Act⁴ “created a National Skill Standards Board to oversee the development of a system of national job skill standards, assessments, and certificates of mastery geared at every occupation in the United States.”⁵

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act attempts to integrate education, job-training, and employment systems by

providing “seed money to leverage institutional change at the community, state and federal levels.”⁶ The goal of this education reform package is to integrate the STW philosophy with Goals 2000 and the National Skill Standards Act by the time the School-to-Work Opportunities Act funding expires October 1, 2001.⁷

In anticipation of federal education reform legislation, Governor Hunt created the Governor’s Commission on Workforce Preparedness in 1993 to ensure that N.C. would lead the way in workforce development initiatives. “JobReady” is the name given to North Carolina’s STW system.⁸ In response to the passage of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, the Commission submitted a grant proposal “JobReady: Making the Right Choice in North Carolina,” in 1995. Through the grant, the state will receive \$30 million in federal grant money over the course of five years.⁹

JobReady Rationale

With SAT scores down and dropout rates up, education reform has been the rally cry behind JobReady implementation. America needs a new form of education, so say proponents of STW, for a new economy that links learning and earning.

According to the grant proposal, “JobReady: Making the Right Choice in North Carolina,” North Carolina has a choice: “Grow more tobacco or grow more jobs.”¹⁰ The Governor’s Commission echoed these sentiments in its proposal to the federal government. Growing more jobs is crucial because “North Carolina does not want to stride into the next century as the state of the working poor.”¹¹

To accomplish this, the Governor’s Commission on Workforce Preparedness sought to make business an equal partner in shaping the future of education. From economic development to school reform, business employers have been leading the

state’s initiatives.

Yet businesses are recognizing the dismal results of public education. Research findings used as a basis for the School-to-Work Opportunities Act included the fact that three-fourths of high school students in the United States enter the workforce without baccalaureate degrees, and many do not possess the academic and entry-level occupational skills necessary to succeed in the changing American workplace.¹² A Human Resource Manager for a Fortune 100 company in Charlotte, N.C. recently shared that their company received 395 applications for 24 entry-level job openings. The interview process included a written and oral evaluation. Out of 320 (75 applicants did not show up for the interview), only 28 applicants passed the written test and only two out of the 28 passed the oral section of the interview process.¹³

Robert Mackey, Chair of the State JobReady Partnership, stated that “kids are entering the workforce unable to find employment, some have even graduated from higher education institutions...many of these kids are lacking in basic skills....”¹⁴ And once again, despite good reports from state officials, recently released 1997-98 ABC test results showed how poor the level of public education in N.C. remains.¹⁵ With results such as these, many employers looked to government for educational reform in order to meet workforce demands.

In a letter endorsing JobReady, Governor Hunt calls for a combined education and workplace vision that embodies academic and skills restructuring. “Our unique challenge is to assure business that enough skilled workers will be there to fill the jobs they create. Meeting this challenge will require business, government, and educators to work hand-in-hand on comprehensive education and workforce preparedness.”¹⁶ By shaping education to train young people,

companies will indeed have the opportunity “to grow their own employees.”

JobReady Blueprint

In order to receive federal implementation funds, each state must submit a state plan outlining extensive requirements that incorporate STW philosophy. In N.C.’s STW implementation plan, JobReady introduces various controversial education concepts. According to the Governor’s Commission on Workforce Preparedness, the JobReady system will ensure that **every student** “will participate in work-based learning and have a self-image as a lifelong learner.”¹⁷ JobReady also ensures that **every employer** “will be an equal partner with educators in the education of young people.”¹⁸

JobReady is not just an attempt to improve learning for students who desire to pursue vocational or technical studies; it is intended to include all students, whether immediately career-bound or college-bound, and whether academically challenged or academically gifted. In the federal STW Act, “every student is required to be a vocational student.”¹⁹ The JobReady Implementation Grant dictates guidelines for schools. **All students** will:

- Learn about career possibilities in kindergarten through fifth grade;
- Explore career interests and aspirations in grades six through eight;
- Prepare career development plans in grade eight;
- Choose a career path and gain training and experience in grades nine through twelve.²⁰

Career development and counseling is an integral part of JobReady. Beginning in elementary school, career planning activities are emphasized to facilitate “local, state and national occupational, education, and labor market needs.”²¹ Beginning in 10th grade, all students will choose a “Career Major,” which integrates academic and technical skills.²² Career majors serve as the “centerpiece of curriculum integration” for the JobReady system.²³ High schools will choose three or more career majors based on an assessment and market analysis of local labor needs. High schools are also expected to employ a “JobBroker” who will serve as the school’s contact person for employment.²⁴

JobReady stresses integration of academic and vocational instruction in the classroom. Although, integrated learning is believed to be innovative, the philosophy is rooted in Marxist teachings and theories dating back to the 1920’s. Over the years, integrated or applied learning has been introduced in the public schools under various other names: constructivist learning, development appropriate learning, naturalistic learning, project method learning, discovery learning, and holistic learning.²⁵

The philosophy of progressive education stresses socialization instruction which is rooted in communist ideology. In a report titled *Polytechnical Education: A Step*, the author defines Polytechnical education as, “[imparting] knowledge to the scientific foundations of modern production where students with the most important branches of industry arm themselves with elementary skills. This involve the students socially...[and] develops a communist attitude toward labor.”²⁶

Along with integrated education that produces “lifetime learners,” individual tracking and data collection exist throughout the JobReady proposal. As outlined in the grant, “JobReady strategy depends on the effective use of the N.C. Information Highway and Distance Learning Satellite for disseminating information and conducting professional development programs.”²⁷

The need for tracking systems is to provide “services to all individuals and employers who need information or assistance regarding education,

training or employment.”²⁸ “North Carolina was the first state to develop and implement a computerized tracking system....”²⁹

Currently, the Vocational Competency Achievement Tracking System (VoCATS) is in full operation for N.C. high schools, and STW tracking should begin in the ninth grade.³⁰

A skills certificate, also known as a “Certificate of Initial Mastery,” is a new achievement document that is used within the data collection process of STW.³¹ This “portable, industry-recognized credential,” is to be used by schools within the JobReady system.³² This certificate will certify that the students have mastered a

skill standards for a career major, as approved by the National Skills Standard Board.³³ Furthermore, the Commission instituted an additional competency test for 10th graders. In JobReady literature, the Commission insist that “this exam will be in addition to, rather than in place of, the high school diploma.”³⁴

To be sure, JobReady blueprints layout an expansive and complex transition from traditional education purpose and philosophy. The grant proposal sums it up this way, “As JobReady develops, it will become institutionalized. JobReady will simply become the way we do business.”³⁵

JobReady Implementation

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act is jointly funded by the United States Departments of Education and Labor. The grant funding is received by the N.C. Department of Commerce and implemented by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Since 1995, the state has received over \$22 million from the Department of Labor in grant funds and has awarded over \$13 million to 74 active local partnerships in 97 of North Carolina’s 100 counties.³⁶ A state JobReady Partnership Council, acting through the Governor’s Commission on Workforce Preparedness, has primary oversight of JobReady at the state level.

With 74 local partnerships already participating in N.C., JobReady implementation is well underway. While specific programs differ as Local Partnerships and Workforce Proficiency Boards create skill standards and provide the framework for the community, “inclusion of all students” is one of the eight key elements of STW outlined by the national Advisory Council for STW Opportunities.³⁷

The Brunswick County grant application reads, “All students will be exposed to the world of work and career counseling from K-12.”³⁸ This specific grant also dictates that the National Career Development Guidelines will be integrated into the curriculum for kindergarten.³⁹ The Union County Partnership has career exploration for the middle grades, and acknowledges its program as the “first serious indoctrination” of students “into the career major concept and choices that will be available....”⁴⁰

The Durham County Partnership states in its grant application that “the standard course of study utilized in Durham’s elementary schools has been aligned with the National Career Development Guidelines” and acknowledges that employers’ needs will be used “to develop and refine curricula, standards for performance-based assessments and certification, new class-

JobReady Career Majors

- Arts and Humanities
- Business and Marketing
- Construction Technology
- Engineering Technology
- Health & Medical Care
- Environmental Sciences
- Manufacturing Technology⁶³
- Biotechnology
- Electronics
- Human Services
- Telecommunication
- Travel & Tourism/
Hospitality

room lesson plans..."⁴¹ The Durham Partnership also confirms that the "attainment of an adequate achievement level will be marked by the conferral of a certificate of skill mastery, which the individual can use to pursue both a job and a post secondary educational placement."⁴²

According to the Career Majors Proposal at Garinger High School in Charlotte, the school "is well on its way to becoming a fully functioning Career Majors School by the 1999-2000 school year...with a K-12 Comprehensive Career Guidance and Counseling Program in effect."⁴³ Garinger currently has four career majors: Arts and Communications; Business and Marketing; Engineering Technology; and Health and Human Services. Also identified in Garinger's proposal is, "By the end of the 8th grade, all students develop Career Development Plans (CDPs) and establish Career Planning Portfolios in preparation for entry in Garinger's curriculum."⁴⁴ As a part of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's STW initiative, "career awareness activities will also be expanded at the elementary school level in the next few years."⁴⁵ In addition, an evaluation of the Garinger's programs will be undertaken. "Outcome goals for students and others affected by the program will be established.... Outcomes that include changes in attitudes and opinions of students, educators and employers will be established, where appropriate, by using a pre and post-measure analysis."⁴⁶ The Garinger proposal concludes that, "The school is developing an innovative communication plan that will facilitate the schools being an outstanding model for other schools in the state and nation."⁴⁷

As implementation of JobReady expands, attitudes and standards in teachers, students and administration require change. Garinger's Principal, Dr. Russell Sgro, admits "a major cultural shift must occur in faculty and staff at Garinger to create a successful Career Majors High School."⁴⁸ The Robeson County grant says "...if...momentum is to be sustained after grant funding ends, traditional attitudes toward school and work must change. As the project develops, the Partnership wants to know if attitudes are, indeed, changing."⁴⁹ The Robeson County implementation plan consists of evaluating "attitudinal change through investigation of various stakeholder concerns at different stages of implementation...to assess...feelings, perceptions, motivations, and attitudes."⁵⁰ It appears classroom instruction is more about behavior modification than it is about academics.

It is interesting to consider that other local partnerships have massive public relation campaigns to ensure that the community perceives the necessity of implementing JobReady. In a recent issue of *Vocational Training News*, the following is noted, "Getting parents, students, employers, and educators to understand and actively support school-to-work may take the message-development of a high-powered public relations firm."⁵¹

To impact local schools further, JobReady implementation proposal depends heavily on local business input and support, "School-to-work systems help employers articulate their own training needs and then ensure that communities work together to meet those needs. Government alone cannot set the standards and restructure schools. To successfully lead students from school-to-work, employers need to be deeply involved: shaping academic and skill standards, defining industry needs, providing workplace experiences for youth and creating career counseling information."⁵² As specified by the JobReady program, special grants, tax credits and economic subsidies will be provided to encourage employer involvement.⁵³

JobReady Concerns

The STW concept is based on the assumption that the public education system, in its present form, is failing and a systematic change in the purpose and philosophy of K-12 public education is needed. While test results and student performance indicate the necessity of reform, should the traditional liberal arts education be further diluted by infusing it with vocational training for all students? At the very heart of the debate, several fundamental questions prevail: Why do public schools exist, and whom do they serve?

Traditionally, American education is centered on individual pursuit of knowledge and opportunity designed to empower citizens to prosper in a free society. Ideally, public education provide graduates with a well-rounded academic foundation equipping them to qualify for practically any entry-level position for which they may apply.

Critics pronounce that JobReady changes the emphasis from a traditional academic based, liberal arts education to workforce preparation. This is done by incorporating academic course material into vocational curricula. It is important to consider that education and workforce training are very different. Education empowers and enriches students for any

career path they may choose. Workforce training, unmistakably, trains students for predetermined work based on labor needs. According to the *Public Agenda*, a national public survey organization, 96 percent of Americans listed academics as "absolutely essential" in providing a successful education and believed that schools nationwide should put more emphasis on basic academic subjects. As a solution for dropping scholastic scores, Americans supported having "tougher and more challenging courses" in academic basics.⁵⁴

Even though the JobReady implementation grant stresses, "rigorous academic standards" at all grade levels for all students in the implementation grant, the philosophy of JobReady appears to undermine this by encouraging business and technology to rewrite school curricula, standards, and graduation requirements in order to facilitate local labor needs.⁵⁵ With this in mind, it is fair to assume that instructional time from core academic subjects will be shifted to accommodate vocational/technical training. For example, many local partnerships have recommended the schools divide the day into more periods in order to have additional opportunities for learning. While other schools are considering scheduling options such as extending school hours from 7 AM to 7 PM.⁵⁶

Former Labor Department economist, Mark Wilson, has little doubt that big government and big business are dictating educational reform, "...[STW] says we need to change the way we teach our kids - make it more work-oriented. It's industrial planning on the human resource side of the equation."⁵⁷ Here, students are valued exclusively for their worth as economic producers and consumers. Ohio State Board of Education member, Diana M. Fessler, points out the paradigm shift in STW by stating, "To center education around workforce development presumes that the government can successfully predict employment needs and dictate one's destiny."⁵⁸

JobReady is accomplished by building a comprehensive "workforce development" system of federal, state and local agencies, which includes highly regulated partnerships with government agencies, business and labor organizations. This concept means that government bureaucracy and local business will play a major role in determining which career clusters will be offered. This type of philosophy appears to be in conflict with the traditional role of limited government and of self-determination.

According to the JobReady grant,

compliance with “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” is expected. The grant reads, “Both Acts provide the opportunity to leverage the integration of reform efforts, and to establish a vision of education and school reform that is articulated and shared across the key policy groups and public.”⁵⁹ Also calling for “every student be prepared for continuous learning and career readiness” is North Carolina’s “ABCs Plus: Plan for Excellent Schools.”⁶⁰

With many valid concerns addressed in this paper, a much larger question looms for JobReady. Why is this systematic transformation taking place in the public schools of North Carolina with little or no public debate. In many cases implementation of this educational reform has progressed without the approval or oversight of the State General Assembly, the State Board of Education, many local boards of education and parents. In response, Speaker of the N.C. House of Representatives Harold Brubaker established the House Select Committee for Federal Education Grants in September, 1997. The purpose of this legislative committee, chaired by Rep. Don Davis (R-Harnett), is to conduct a comprehensive review of all federal grant programs related to K-12 education in the state. During deliberations on STW, several committee members expressed amazement at how far JobReady implementation had progressed and how unaware they were of this initiative. In addition, DPI Deputy Secretary Richard Thompson testified before the committee, “...School to Work [has], to my knowledge, not been discussed, at great length, at the State Board and in fact, I don’t remember it being discusse[d].”⁶¹

On May 19, 1998, the House Select Committee submitted an interim report to the Speaker’s office. One recommendation, which has been included in the House’s version of the 1998 budget bill, requires the Governor and Advisory Budget Commission to report to the General Assembly all state, federal and foundation monies used to fund programs in the state. If passed, this provision should provide the General Assembly more oversight of JobReady. The committee is directed to make a final report by December 31, 1998.

Diana M. Fessler puts this issue into perspective, “In just 200 years, this country went from being an English colony to being the Greatest Nation on Earth. We’ve had more Nobel prize recipients than any other industrialized nation. We’ve sent men into outer space...we’ve pioneered open-heart surgery, and our science and technology are copied world-wide. Those who accomplished incredible feats were the product of an education system that emphasized academics, not life-long job training for the perceived good of the economy.”⁶² ¶

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31. *School-to-Work Opportunities Act*, Section 4(22).
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