

# ECONOMIC PROGRESS THROUGH PUBLIC EDUCATION

## A Report on Workforce Readiness

### Public Education and Economic Development in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area

#### A Final Report of a Confluence St. Louis Task Force

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dramatic changes have occurred in the economic environment in the past decade. New technologies, foreign competition, and the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy have profoundly affected the requirements of the workplace. New and higher-order skills are demanded not only of entry-level workers but throughout the workplace.

In today's highly mobile technological age, business locates where it can find employees capable of doing the work business needs done to remain competitive. If the region does not prepare its youth via the public educational system, then it faces the potential of seeing the loss of its best jobs to better educated employees elsewhere. All residents of the region will pay the price of this missed opportunity. For the region to meet its potential, the human resources within it must reach theirs.

The Confluence St. Louis Task Force on Public Education and Economic Development explored workforce readiness and the relationship between education and economic development. The Report recommends ways employers and the wider community can work with the education system to enhance the vitality of both the economy and public education in the region.

## FACTS

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Facts represent the database of the Task Force. They are derived from the published materials, facts reported by resource persons, or from a consensus of Task Force understanding of the opinions of resource persons.

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Nationally there is a continued employment decline in the high-wage manufacturing and distribution sectors. The St. Louis region reflects this shift and most new jobs in the bi-state area will be in the service sectors.

Skills and attributes essential to success in the workplace are changing in response to changing local, national, and international competition. Here, as elsewhere, youth entering the workforce need to know the "three R's," plus the "new basics" such as learning how to learn, creative thinking and problem-solving. A regional employer survey conducted in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area in 1988 by the Employment Management Association confirms this finding. Of the employers who responded to the questionnaire, 80 percent reported that within the past five to ten years their business has significantly upscaled entry-level jobs, demanding higher order skills of entry-level applicants.

The survey also revealed that many area applicants lack basic skills needed for success in today's marketplace. One-third of the respondents said that new hires, those without prior work experience, do not possess basic skills necessary to satisfactorily fill entry-level jobs. Additionally, one-third of the employers responded that new hires generally do not possess satisfactory work attitudes and motivation.

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Confluence St. Louis' Mission is to improve the quality of life in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area through broad-based participation by interested citizens in study and action on issues of importance to the region. This summary provides very basic information from the task force report. Anyone, however, with an interest in this subject is encouraged to review the full report. Copies of the full report and information about Confluence St. Louis can be obtained from the Confluence St. Louis office, 4050 Lindell Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63108, (314) 533-3123.

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Despite the significant gap between area employer needs and workforce preparedness, the Task Force heard testimony that such mismatches have yet to affect the "bottom line." Although employers must search harder for qualified applicants, they can still find the entry-level employees they need. Thus, the issue of workforce readiness is not yet seen as a crisis for business per se, but rather as a community problem - which, in fact, it is. When large numbers of applicants are deemed unqualified for the jobs they need to support themselves and their families, the community suffers. Moreover, the future is at risk since children entering schools today will inevitably become the workforce of tomorrow.

If a highly educated workforce is essential to economic success, it follows that a highly productive education system is required to prepare that workforce. If one-fourth of today's children are at risk of school failure and a lifetime of dependency, it follows that schools must become responsive to the needs of those children.

Just when the economy is requiring an ever more demanding body of knowledge and skills, the education system is confronted with a host of problems not of its own making. The school population is becoming more ethnically diverse, covering a broader socio-economic range and challenging schools to address a variety of student needs, attributes and learning styles.

Meanwhile, children are beset by burdens and distractions that affect their motivation and ability to learn. For example, one child out of four lives in poverty, 14 percent were born to teen-age mothers. Drugs, violence, sex, and cheating influence school life. Parents, busy surviving economically, are shifting the challenge back to the schools which are expected to provide supports no longer available within the family, and not readily accessible within society.

The problems of public education are so severe and so intertwined with social and economic events that they will be solved when the entire community recognizes that they are, in fact, the community's problem. A recent study by the RAND corporation found four factors present in cities where successful, system-wide school improvement has occurred. Those factors are: outreach to the community, broad availability of information, community-wide agreement on goals, and a willingness to subordinate traditional roles to the larger imperative of community-wide school improvement.

## CONCLUSIONS

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Conclusions express the value judgements of the Task Force, based on the facts.

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- *The civic and economic vitality of the region depend on the quality of its workforce.*
- *Higher-order skills are required for success in the workplace.*
- *Without basic workplace skills, those at the bottom of the economic heap are likely to remain there.*
- *The school population is becoming more diverse.*
- *Children are beset by burdens and distractions that affect their ability and motivation to learn.*
- *To respond to accelerating economic and social change, schools themselves must become agents of change.*
- *Accountability implies agreement on goals and serious measures of progress towards those goals.*
- *Concentrating resources on the youngest children reaps cost-effective rewards.*
- *The education bureaucracy cannot solve all problems alone.*
- *Although many individuals and organizations are working for school improvement in the region, no coordinated strategies for systematic change have been developed.*
- *The St. Louis Region has within it the ingredients necessary for concerted, system-wide school improvement.*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are the Task Force's specific suggestions for change, based on the facts and conclusions.

The most difficult aspect of change, and the essential first step, is to develop a common agenda propelled by a generative force for reform. Finding solutions and implementing them will require collective action, not only because solutions demand joint intelligence, but because they require the support of a broad coalition, informed about the challenge and dedicated to the goal.

The Confluence St. Louis Public Education and Economic Development Task Force believes that, collectively implemented, the recommendations outlined below can help to insure that the St. Louis region has a prepared workforce that is ready to meet the needs of a rapidly changing marketplace:

**1. Improving Education Must Become a Community Obsession.** Significant segments of the community are unaware of the threats and opportunities created by recent changes in the economy and the emerging workforce. **Therefore, a coordinated, sustained public information campaign should be mounted to dramatize the danger of an ill-prepared workforce, capture the community's attention and enhance community understanding of the relationship between public education and economic development.** Actions to that end include:

- Involving media personnel and public relations experts to inform community leaders and the public.
- Collecting and disseminating data that documents problems and successes.
- Targeting groups within the community through conferences and reports about workforce readiness.

**2. All Segments of the Community Must be Involved in a Collective Effort Focused on Economic Progress Through Public Education.** It is not enough to exhort schools to "do better." The joint effort of all segments of the community is required for significant improvement in public education. **A broad-based alliance can be formed with the mission of enhancing the effectiveness of schools in preparing their students to become productive, self-sufficient and competitive in a global economy.** Actions to that end include:

- Meeting with leaders from various segments of the community to explore forming an alliance.
- Convening those decision-makers and facilitating discussions leading to a joint mission statement, goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities for alliance members.

**3. The Public Education System's Capacity to Change from Within and to Respond to Economic and Social Change Must be Fortified.** To effectively prepare a changing student body for a changing workplace, the education system must also change. For this to happen, schools themselves must become agents of change. **Moreover, early education and parental involvement can lay a strong foundation towards preventing future problems.** Actions to that end include:

- Nurturing conditions where educators and education-related organizations investigate, experiment with, and implement fundamental reforms by:
  - Supporting processes for decision-making that takes advantage of the knowledge, skills and creativity of school personnel.
  - Encouraging service on school boards.
  - Assuring that measures of student achievement will lead to enhanced learning.
- Supporting developmentally appropriate programs and services that afford high-quality preschool experiences to children with their parents or care-givers by:
  - Supporting and expanding early childhood programs such as Parents as Teachers and Head Start.
- Involving parents in every stage of their children's educational experience and encouraging employers to support such involvement.

**4. Closer Ties Must be Achieved Between the Schools and the Social Networks that Serve Children and Their Families.** Children are impacted daily by an array of burdens and distractions that influence their motivation and ability to learn. Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the social networks that serve children and their families be made more accessible in and through the schools. Actions to that end include:

- Promoting coordination of state governmental services and tying them more closely to the schools.
- Involving relevant local government agencies in such coordination.
- Drawing into the network the private, not-for-profit organizations that fill needs unmet by government.

**5. The Public-Private Sector Must Take an Active and Sustained Role in Improving Education.** While school/business/community alliances have delivered much, the challenges facing the region today require not only continuation of existing programmatic efforts, but expansion to a more sophisticated level aimed at fundamental school improvement. A continuum of progressive phases should be implemented to continue and to expand business/school/community involvement and alliances. This work should occur in the following phases:

I. The first includes specific, short-term programs at the school-building or classroom level that lead to:

- identification and expansion of collaborative efforts.
- increased community awareness of existing opportunities.
- technical support for initiating such collaborations.

II. The second includes personal, ongoing, and sustained involvement that leads to:

- evaluating, documenting and publicizing impact and benefits of such involvement.
- using successful partners as a recruitment council.
- school staff accountability for ongoing relationships at this level.

III. The third involves systemic reform that leads to changes in policy, reallocation of resources, leadership/management development and long-range planning. Actions to that end include:

- establishing an education/business study group to identify long-term economic and employment needs.
- establishing a regional round table of major education and civic leaders.

**6. Education Reform Must be Supported by a Commitment From the Community to Provide the Required Resources.** Schools must be supplied with the needed resources if they are to perform at a high level. For that to occur:

- business and community leaders need to lobby citizens and government to develop a tax system that will support educational infrastructure.
- business leaders must meet to study, make recommendations and take action on:
  - school government structures.
  - resource disparities among schools districts.
  - allocation of current education expenditures.
  - means for providing funding sufficient to ensure the best return on the educational investment.

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Task Force recommendations are made to the entire community. To carry the recommendations forward, Confluence St. Louis has formed an Implementation Committee, which is open to all its members, to bring together the resources needed to achieve the recommendations. Economic Progress Through Public Education: A Report on Workforce Readiness is a guide for action, therefore, the focus is implementation of the recommendations.

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