



## Local School-to-Work Partnerships: Lessons from Pennsylvania

by

Anita Kane & William J. Stull

### INTRODUCTION

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), signed into law by President Clinton in 1994, provides five-year grants for states to establish school-to-work (STW) systems based on statewide and local STW partnerships.

Local partnerships' primary goal is to establish STW systems that provide a variety of school- and work-based learning experiences leading to defined postsecondary education or employment opportunities.

### HOW THEY WORK

As soon as a state has established a statewide partnership and begun to receive STWOA funds, local partnerships are formed which can then apply for grants. Each state sets its own guidelines for local partnership structure and the grant application process. To be eligible for funding, local partnerships typically have to show that school districts are committed to the project, that local businesses are active participants in the enterprise, and that students in multiple schools and/or districts will benefit. Once a local partnership has met these criteria and received funding, the state appoints a grants facilitator who works with the partnership to implement the STW system it has proposed.

In Pennsylvania, the Department of Education works with schools through a system of local organizations known

as Intermediate Units (IU's). Twenty-nine IU's across the state provide support services such as special education programs, teacher training, computer facilities, and online access to the 501 public school districts, as well as to non-public schools. Each IU services from 12 to 25 school districts except for the School District of Philadelphia, which operates its own IU. This organizational model gave Pennsylvania an established structure for implementing local STW partnerships in that school districts are already connected to one another by belonging to IU's. Consequently, many local partnerships are organized by an IU and consist of the school districts served by the IU in cooperation with outside organizations concerned with educational improvement.

### HOW THEY FUNCTION

The local partnership model works because groups of districts working together on relatively large projects will accomplish more than single districts working by themselves on smaller projects. Effective local partnerships can:

- Serve as a communication link between the participating schools and districts, thereby increasing the flow of information about successful practices
- Organize STW activities that need to draw students from multiple schools or districts in order to

achieve the minimum scale necessary for efficient operation

- Simplify the task of establishing STW links between individual schools and local businesses, and
- Provide industry involvement with schools in writing standards and identifying industry skills.

The result is that local partnerships greatly expand the information and opportunities available to schools seeking to establish STW programs.

### LOCAL PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

The types of programs described in this *Spotlight* have been undertaken by a variety of local partnerships in Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, with considerable success. In all cases, coordination at the local partnership level has given individual teachers, districts, and schools opportunities they would not have had on their own.

#### *Educator in the Workplace*

The goal of Educator in the Workplace programs is for greater student knowledge of business operations, career opportunities, and daily workplace demands. The most effective programs require teachers to develop lesson plans based on their workplace experiences. Participating teachers often prepare staff development programs for their colleagues based on their workplace experiences.

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### ***Making Business Connections***

Many local partnerships have established ongoing links between educators and local businesses in order to foster easy communication. Programs have business representatives serving on boards that visit schools and classrooms regularly. Partnerships also sponsor events that foster ongoing dialogue between teachers and employers.

### ***Career Awareness Programs***

The STWOA mandates that participating schools provide career awareness activities in the K-12 curriculum. In fact, such activities are the most common form of STW programming. To provide career awareness more efficiently, many local partnerships in Pennsylvania and elsewhere are developing career awareness materials and/or activities and then making them available to all districts and schools in the partnership. Many partnerships have developed collections of career awareness materials available at either central locations within the partnership region or on a website developed by the partnership. Local partnerships also arrange for local business representatives to visit schools and describe alternative career paths.

### ***Providing Student Work Experiences***

Partnerships draw students from many school districts and place them in a variety of programs from full paid internships to job shadowing experiences. Because the local partnership is involved, these opportunities are available to many more students than if undertaken by a single school. Some partnerships require student work experiences as part of the STW program.

### ***Operating Student Camps***

Intensive career exploration is made possible for students through summer camps, which rely heavily on the participation of local businesses. Camps also give students the opportunity to experience an in-depth look at one or several careers.

### ***Improving Communication***

Many partnerships have assembled collections of STW best practice materials drawn from the experiences of schools and districts both within and outside the partnership. These publications typically include not only descriptions of individual projects, but also a variety of supporting materials such as forms, letters, curriculum links, and evaluations by students and teachers.

***The participation of area businesses in developing career clusters is vital to the success of local partnerships.***

### ***Organizing Workshops/Seminars***

In addition to providing information in printed form, partnerships often conduct best practice seminars and workshops for teachers, school administrators, parents, and employers. These programs serve many purposes for local partnerships, including the ability to share developed materials and programs among school districts; the opportunity to keep the lines of communication open between educators and local businesses; and an occasion to promote the STW initiative.

### ***Developing Regional Career-Related Skills***

The development of career clusters is integral to the STW model and mandated by the STWOA. Local partnerships are able to provide the information and resources necessary to schools in order to develop realistic career clusters. The participation of area businesses in this process is vital to its success. Partnerships have put together teams composed of both educators and business people to outline skills that are focused on specific occupations or industries prominent in their region.

### ***Developing Curriculum***

There is a need to create new curriculum materials to enhance the

school-based learning component of STW programs. Often, these materials are based on the general competencies and specific skills identified in the SCANS report (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). Local partnerships have frequently taken the lead in helping to prepare these materials. In some cases, partnerships merely provide financial support to educators to write the appropriate manuals and lesson plans. In other cases, partnerships have been involved in the development of project-based curriculum development.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Local STW partnerships are just beginning to have a significant impact on the STW programs of individual schools and districts. Exemplary, ongoing STW programs have been developed as a result of the local partnership model established in Pennsylvania. Partnerships have instituted many valuable programs for teachers and students, established connections with local businesses, and initiated STW curriculum revisions. The longevity of these programs beyond the STWOA funding remains to be seen; however, if educators, businesses, students, and parents see a benefit to the economic development of their communities, continued local support for these initiatives is possible.

### **REFERENCES**

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