THE WESTCHESTER SCHOOL-TO-WORK INITIATIVE: Prospects and Challenges

A Focus Group Report
From Public Agenda to
The Westchester Education Coalition, Inc.
Public Agenda

Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Public Agenda works to help citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's nonpartisan research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for its extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials and opinion research studies have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decisionmakers across the political spectrum.

Westchester Education Coalition, Inc.

The Westchester Education Coalition, Inc., is a unique partnership of schools, colleges, business, government, churches, social services, and community organizations working together to improve the quality of education in Westchester and Putnam counties, New York. The Coalition is affiliated with Westchester 2000 and is classified as a Section 501(C)3 organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954.
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The Westchester School-to-Work Initiative: Prospects and Challenges
About the Research

This report is based on qualitative research — focus groups and face-to-face interviews. On May 31 and June 2 the Public Agenda conducted four focus groups on issues surrounding the school-to-work initiative for the Westchester Education Coalition. Public Agenda also conducted face-to-face interviews with three Westchester school superintendents.

Focus groups are discussions with small groups of demographically representative citizens. Conducted by professionally-trained moderators following a systematic research plan, focus groups are especially helpful in exploring public attitudes about poorly understood issues. Researchers can get people's spontaneous reactions, ask questions about unfamiliar concepts, and gauge people's reactions to new arguments and information. As with all qualitative research, the findings reported here should be interpreted as thematic and suggestive, since they are based on a self-selected sample of participants. Quantitative generalizations are more appropriate when based on surveys of randomly drawn samples.

Participants were recruited by the Westchester Education Coalition according to socioeconomic, ethnic and geographic specifications provided by Public Agenda. Each of the focus groups lasted approximately two hours. The breakdown of the groups was as follows:

- The principals' focus group brought together six high school principals from Yonkers, Briarcliff Manor, Byram Hills, Port Chester, New Rochelle and White Plains;
- The teachers' focus group brought together eight high school teachers from White Plains, Port Chester, Briarcliff Manor and New Rochelle;
- The parents' focus groups brought together eight parents from White Plains, Port Chester and Pleasantville;
- The students' group brought together 10 high school students from White Plains, Port Chester and Briarcliff Manor.

To place the Westchester findings in a national context, public opinion data from national surveys conducted by Public Agenda are reported where appropriate. A major national report from Public Agenda — *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* — provided some of the conceptual underpinnings of this report. A focus group study of Westchester business leaders' perspective, entitled *New Directions for Westchester Schools*, is also cited here. That study was conducted by EDK Associates Inc. in 1993.
At every level in our country, there is agreement that we need a more competent and productive workforce. Today, when any young person embarks on a career, he or she is bound to find a workplace that is characterized by consistent and dramatic change. To succeed in this environment of ongoing change, young people need a strong educational foundation.

To make education more compelling and relevant, and to give all students a future that promises attractive and attainable careers, we must strengthen the connections between school and work. Such strengthening will require comprehensive reform resulting in an educational system that holds all students to high standards, that provides opportunities for learning in various community and work settings, and that offers curricula that bring real-life situations into the classroom.

The term, School-to-Work — which is usually used to describe such initiatives is frequently misinterpreted as applying only to students who won't continue their education beyond high school. But school-work connections ought to be a part of every student's education. To prepare students for the 21st century, such a system needs to open doors at any point along the way, either to future education or to productive work.

Efforts to provide more effective transitions from school to high-skill, high-wage careers have already been the subject of numerous reports and initiatives across the nation, including legislation in at least 15 states and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act passed by Congress last year. In this region, the Westchester Education Coalition has also been focusing on issues relating to how students may be better prepared to insure a productive future for themselves — and, ultimately, for our nation's communities.

Beginning in 1993, when it invited Marc Tucker from the Center for Education and the Economy and Stan Lundine, former New York State Lieutenant Governor, to help frame the issues, the Coalition has undertaken efforts to inform the public about significant initiatives in the field. The Coalition's last two annual conferences have been devoted to providing a glimpse at various models being developed, both elsewhere in the nation and close to home.

The Coalition's Work-based Learning Task Force, has been involved in a number of action research projects designed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of work-based learning. The Task Force, one strand of a project of the Westchester Teacher Education Group devoted to improving teacher education in the county and funded by the Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Westchester Fund of the Westchester Community Foundation, is particularly interested in how work-based learning will affect future teacher preparation.

The Westchester Education Coalition has also sought to determine the perspective of the local business community on issues involved in recruiting a new workforce: how executives assess their current applicants and what new skills are required in a more demanding workplace? In New Directions for Westchester Schools, a report commissioned by the Coalition, employers predictably were concerned about the future, not only about how well-prepared both high school and college graduates will be, but how strong their work ethic will be as well.

Realizing it needed to hear from other voices as well, the Coalition, with support from the Panasonic Foundation, turned to the Public Agenda Foundation, a not-for-profit research organization that helps policy makers build an informed judgment — and average citizens to understand critical policy issues — by exploring Americans' attitudes toward educational reform efforts. The findings from the focus groups it conducted with parents, students, teachers, principals, and superintendents form the basis of this report — The Westchester School-to-Work Initiative: Prospects and Challenges.
We hope that this report will suggest areas of common agreement which will shape collaborative efforts to improve the preparation of our young people in schools by building new connections between school and work. This report should also help to clarify the barriers — including serious reservations and misunderstandings about the school-to-work agenda itself — that must be confronted if reform efforts are to succeed.

Most of all, we hope the process itself — of understanding each other’s concerns — will not only inform public debate, but provide a fruitful guide to future action.

Shirley L. Mow
Executive Director
Westchester Education Coalition, Inc.
Focus group participants were generally satisfied with the Westchester schools. Beyond this initial satisfaction, participants were concerned about how well the schools were teaching the basics and coping with social problems. The lack of a work ethic and concern about the economy emerged as prominent themes. However, people's economic anxieties did not directly translate into support for school reform or the school-to-work initiative.

**Initial Satisfaction**

Among the focus group participants interviewed there was a general sense of satisfaction with the schools, at least initially. Participants' first comments were usually positive and upbeat. Unlike the superintendents, who tended to look at schools from a "systemic" perspective, most participants' evaluations were driven by their experiences with their own schools. "I'm pleased," said one parent. "We still have a dedicated faculty that come in on Saturday, the curriculum is fine." "I think our school does a pretty good job," said a student.

In contrast with other communities where Public Agenda researchers found substantial concerns about safety, fear of violence did not emerge as a prominent theme. (One exception was a spontaneous discussion among the principals of the dress code on sneakers and hats they had adopted in response to gang activity.) But as the group discussions evolved, specific criticisms and misgivings about other areas emerged.

**Concern About the Basics**

Some parents worried that the schools' agenda had been overloaded with noneducational issues and that this led to a decline in the focus on academic learning. One parent thought the schools' emphasis on teaching self-esteem was misplaced. "They should be concentrating on math, history," she said. "Schools are sometimes getting too much into values and morals that parents need to be taking care of." Another parent complained that the basics were given short shrift because of tangential concerns: "There is so much material kids have to learn now in elementary school, there is not enough time for them to learn the basics or the multiplication tables." Teachers also cited an overburdened agenda. Some complained that trips and off-campus activities were taking kids out of the classrooms too often, cutting into academic instruction.

These sentiments echo findings from *First Things First* — a Public Agenda study of Americans' attitudes toward education — where six in 10 respondents (60%) said there was "not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing and math" in their own communities' schools.

**Concern Over Social Problems and Values**

Many initial concerns raised by parents and educators dealt with the difficult social environment in which the schools operate. Rather than dissatisfaction with specific school policies, people voiced concerns about how social problems and inadequate parental involvement affect kids.

"Schools are facing more and more of the social ills, kids are coming with more baggage," observed one Westchester high school principal. "They're getting less and less support from home. It's a greater strain on our resources." Students from poorer families might be without supervision while their parents (or parent) struggle to make ends meet.

These sentiments are consistent with another Public Agenda study, *Assignment Incomplete*, conducted in 1995. Four in 10 (40%) Americans thought kids face the most pressure today "among their friends because of peer pressure." Another 27% thought "at home because of troubled families" and another 20% "in their neighborhoods because of the threat of drugs and crime." Only one in 10 (9%) thought kids face the most pressure and stress "at schools because of tough academic expectations."
Even high school principals from affluent communities felt that many of their students were beset by pressure borne of social problems. One of them said, "More children are being hospitalized for drugs and alcohol and for suicide." Affluent parents were often too quick to treat their kids like adults, some principals observed, and often failed to set appropriate boundaries and expectations of behavior. "The reason kids are stressed is they don't know what's right or wrong... There's no clarity, no parameters," noted one principal from an affluent community. Another recounted a story about a father who wanted to cover the costs of his son's vandalism by simply writing a check. He could not understand the principal's insistence that the student be disciplined as well.

The Work Ethic in Doubt

Many teachers complained about a declining work ethic among students. They thought it was getting harder to get students to pay attention and to apply themselves to their work. "Apathy is the operative word," said one teacher. "The vast majority of students are difficult to motivate, and they are not driven to succeed on their own." Another teacher said, "Parents are weakening on enforcing work habits. We are being told to hold kids less accountable for turning stuff in on time." There was some sense among teachers and principals that college-bound kids from affluent backgrounds were more likely to be goal-oriented and more willing to apply themselves than other students. But one parent thought educators were partly responsible because they were not demanding enough of kids. "Kids don't have a sense of what they can do because they are patronized by school," she said. "[The school is saying:] 'great job, keeping moving.'"

The concerns about a declining work ethic were strikingly similar to the concerns expressed by local business people two years ago in a separate study conducted for the Westchester Education Coalition. One finding from the focus groups conducted then was that "The number one problem facing the business community in looking to hire is the absence of a work ethic."

Westchester is also quite similar to the rest of the nation when it comes to the work ethic issue. Assignment Incomplete shows that Americans place a top premium on teaching work values and a work ethic in the schools. For example, 83% of the public said it was "absolutely essential" for the schools to teach "good work habits such as being responsible, on time and disciplined." Almost eight in ten (78%) said it was "absolutely essential" for the schools to teach "the value of hard work." Many of the people who said these goals were essential criticized the schools' performance. Forty-four percent said the schools in their own community were doing an "only fair" or "poor" job of teaching good work habits. About half (48%) also said their schools were doing an "only fair" or "poor" job of teaching the value of hard work.

Economic Uncertainty

One striking theme that consistently came up was the prevalent sense of anxiety about the economy. With no prompting, people in every focus group talked about economic uncertainty: the difficulty of finding good jobs, and businesses ratcheting up the skills they require of workers. One principal said, "The better paying jobs are fewer...the broader base of jobs isn't there any more." A parent said, "All the big companies are downsizing. We don't have the job security anymore."

These anxieties are not unique to Westchester. National surveys show that Americans have been pessimistic about economic prospects for some time, despite the economic growth of the past two years. In Westchester, highly visible firms have been cutting back on their workforce or moving out altogether for several years. Other businesses — such as the new mall in White Plains — may take up the employment slack, but to ordinary citizens these unpredictable changes engender fear and insecurity. There are no guarantees that these new jobs will last or that they will pay as well as in the past.

Adults suspected the students were oblivious to the long term. As one father said, "I'm happy if I can get my kids to think three months ahead." Yet the students we interviewed were quite worried about their job and career prospects. In answering a question about their economic prospects, one student retorted "What job picture? There's nothing cut there." Some of the sensitivity displayed by students to the job picture may be a reaction to their summer search for jobs, but the effect is the same.
**Do People Connect Economic Uncertainty to Education Reform?**

One key issue is whether people's economic anxieties led them to support a greater focus on workforce skills or other changes in the schools. In fact, focus group participants did not connect economic tough times to a need for school reform. The chief conclusion people made was that a difficult economy adversely affected the schools, not that the schools needed to better prepare kids because of a difficult economy.

The principals, for example, talked about how the economic downturn added pressures on students and decreased tax revenues for schools. One said, "The economy has forced both parents out of the home so there's no one there to watch out for the kids...My kids aren't coming to school because they work. I have juniors, seniors legitimately holding down full-time jobs." Several principals and a few teachers pointed out that certioris — taxpayer challenges to tax assessments — had become more commonplace and cut into the schools' budgets as a result. People readily understood that a bad economy hurt the schools. They did not infer that the schools needed to teach differently as a result of a bad economy.

The superintendents were an exception: two of the three interviewed strongly felt that economic changes demanded fundamental education reform. They felt the work environment had changed drastically and that the education students received was out of step with what companies needed.
II. Work Force Skills and the School-to-Work Initiative

Few people thought that students were prepared for work when they graduated high school but they also questioned whether this should be part of the schools’ mission. For most people interviewed, the main objective of the public schools was to prepare kids for college. Vocational-technical alternatives were generally disdained.

Still, there was a consistent sense that students can learn a lot from workplace experiences and enthusiasm for the notion of applied learning.

What are the Schools Doing About Work Skills?

There was a widespread sense that the schools are doing little to teach the skills needed in the workplace. Most people, for example, did not think that upon graduation the typical high school student had the skills necessary to find a quality job. One teacher assessed the outlook for his kids in this way: “Some are qualified, and then there are those who I just wonder where they’re going to end up. How many McDonald’s employees can we have? Kids are just falling by the wayside.” In fact, many doubted that teaching work skills was even a part of the schools’ mission.

To many educators, the mission of the schools was to teach kids how to think, not to teach them a specific body of information. “Our mission is to turn kids into thinkers, people who can think independently,” said one teacher. The principals thought it was unrealistic to expect the schools to develop successful technical skills programs. “We’re never going to be able to write high school programs to keep up with the quickly changing technological needs of business,” said a principal. Thinking and communication skills were the top priority. “There’s a tremendous amount of information—I don’t think any of us can keep up,” said another principal. “We should be teaching kids how to ask questions.”

College, College, College

Educators and parents had another straightforward explanation for the lack of focus on workforce skills: the schools were focused on getting kids to college. The percentage of college-bound students was used repeatedly as the main criteria for distinguishing successful schools. It was one of the first things the principals talked about when talking about their schools. One teacher pointed out that “They [the schools] say how many go to college, but you never see how many get a job.”

For many people, especially parents talking about the future of their children, a college education has become a requisite and essential part of success. Assignment Incomplete found that 83% of parents whose children were in grades K-12 expected their children to go on to college. “Years ago our parents were lucky to have a high school diploma,” said one Westchester parent. “Nowadays you have to have those four years [of college] to work at any job.”

Ironically, the notion that a college education is essential may have caused some to conclude that a child’s K-12 education can be virtually written off. If the only education that “really” counts is college, the onus on learning from kindergarten through high school may decrease. The community college option may reinforce this dynamic, since it can serve as a stepping stone to a four-year school for those who did not succeed academically.

School is About Credentialism

For the most part, the student group’s rationale for doing well in school went this way: good grades were important for getting into a good college and a degree from a good college could get them a good job. School, be it K-12 or higher education, was mostly about getting the right credentials. Real learning and real skills seemed to be besides the point.

That logic is not confined to only high school students. When asked why education was key to getting a good job, only 31% of respondents to the Assignment Incomplete study said it was because “schools teach people the kinds of knowledge and skills that help them on the job.” A full majority —
59% — said it was “mostly because employers are reluctant to hire people who don’t have a high school diploma.”

Among the Westchester principals, there was a surprisingly strong sense that success in life was determined by ‘who you know’ more than ‘what you know.’ Networking and making the right connections was the best thing kids would get out of going to the “right” college, not higher quality learning.

**College is not for Everyone, But...**

There was widespread recognition among the participants that college was not for everyone. The problem was — and this theme came up in every focus group — that kids who did not necessarily belong in college were pushed in that direction or not served at all. The perception was that no game plan existed for students who were not college-bound. As one teacher said, “There doesn’t seem to be a place for the average kid: you’re either going to college or you’re a reject. So the average kids have to either hang with the losers or the college kids.”

That sentiment echoes a finding from *Assignment Incomplete* where 54% of the American public said “college is not a realistic option for some kids so the schools should prepare them for jobs” and only about one third (35%) said “public school system should give all kids who come out of high school the knowledge and skills necessary to go on to college.”

As these participants pointed out, the schools were acting as if college was for everyone. Parents were part of the problem, according to teachers. “No one’s going to say: my kids needs a slower class,” said one teacher. “But they are going to say: My kid’s not being challenged. But this makes kids feel stupid — they’re listening to kids that are going to Harvard lead discussions and they can’t get it.”

**The Stigma of Vocational Training**

The college track had become almost requisite but one alternative — vocational training — had been discredited, according to participants. “Vocational education has become a dirty word,” said one teacher. It seemed that the programs gradually developed a reputation as a place of last resort. “We had a very good voc-ed program, and it gradually eroded...It happened because of the stigma that was attached to it. And then we get the worst students in that program...the counselor didn’t know where to put these kids.”

A few participants mentioned BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services), which offers — in addition to several other services and programs — a vocational training program in New York State, as an example of an unsatisfactory alternative to college. Their comments conjured a program that was not desirable and had little prestige. One student had a clear career goal — she wanted to be a veterinarian and take some courses at BOCES. But she recalled this interaction: “I wanted to be in BOCES, and my guidance counselor is like, ‘don’t go into that.’ He was telling me that’s for people who plan not to go to college.” One principal recalled that a survey of BOCES vocational track graduates showed none of them had found work in their fields.

The parents we interviewed clearly thought workforce skills were important but it was just as clear that their first instinct was to “protect” their kids from this kind of learning. A major stumbling block seems to be an automatic read of workforce skills as vocational/technical skills. The very phrase “school-to-work” seemed to evoke the stigma of something intended for those not bound for college. In answering a question about work force skills, one parent reacted by saying, “For my own I didn’t want vocational instruction, but it’s good for kids to see this man, he didn’t go to college but he works hard and is a contributing member of society and it’s OK. Sometimes we don’t expose our kids to that and they need to know those jobs are valuable.” A Latino parent worried that Hispanic kids might be pushed into training programs because of weaker language skills or lower expectations. A teacher also reacted to applied learning by linking it to vocational training, and the dangers of tracking. “It’s great for some kids, but not college-bound kids,” he said. “I fear the extension of this, the academies that get kids in on one thing or another at age 14. But for some kids, it has great merit.” From this perspective, work skills may be valuable but they are valuable for someone else’s child.
One parent shared an interesting story: “They tried to steer my kid toward vocational high school and I was like ‘excuse me?’” When that parent attended an award ceremony she saw high-achieving kids headed for college getting scholarships for their involvement with a business-skills program. Her perception of the program changed — she no longer thought this was something to steer her child away from.

The schools seemed to be caught up in a circle of expectations. On the one hand, people say they want the public schools to offer alternatives to college because not everyone belongs there. On the other hand, most parents want the schools to direct their own children to college, and most principals and teachers perceive a successful public education to graduate students who go on to college.

**What Students Gain From Workplace Experiences**

Focus group participants had very positive reactions to student internships, mentoring programs, and workplace experiences. But they did not look to these experiences to teach specific job skills so much as to teach students responsible work habits, promote a work ethic and expose them to different career paths.

Participants wanted students to learn what appropriate adult behavior in the workplace entailed: the importance of taking responsibility, of showing up on time, of speaking respectfully to the customers. “Working will teach kids the importance of manners, dress, attitude...he'll improve as a person. It doesn't teach social studies, but teaches how to think,” said one teacher. “Reliability, commitment to the job” were some things kids need to pick up according to a parent. A teacher spoke about a direct experience she had: “This kid was a trouble maker at school. But at work he’s polite and well mannered. He learned something there he could never learn at school.”

The focus on such values should not be surprising. Principals and teachers typically focused on hard work and motivation as the characteristics that distinguished successful students from unsuccessful ones. According to a 1993 study, the Westchester business community expected workplace internships to accomplish much the same thing. The business people interviewed thought instilling better work attitudes would be a prime gain from such programs.

There were also practical lessons to be learned. Some spoke of the value of exposing students to the reality of careers they may have only fantasized about. The hope was internships might save kids from wasting time and education on career tracks they might ultimately reject. This was one student’s concern who said, “You think you want a job, and you go to college and you still think you’re going to have that job, and you get that job and you realize — I don’t want to do this all day for the rest of my life.” A parent also saw the value of an internship the same way: “They [students] may have some idea of what they want to do and they can find out if it turns them on or if it’s not what they want to do after all.” Another student pointed out that most students only know about careers from what they see in the movies. “We never have hands-on experience,” he said. “And we’ve got to realize that watching that movie [Philadelphia] is not what it’s like in the courtroom.”

**What do People Think of Applied Learning?**

Focus group participants were generally very enthusiastic about the concept of applied learning, or learning by applying skills and knowledge to solve real-world problems. The only participants who were ambivalent were teachers. For the rest, the operative word was relevance, making a connection between academic learning and real-life. “They are learning all the textbook stuff, but they don’t have to apply it today,” pointed out a parent. They wanted to transform learning into something inspirational for students instead of something they have to muddle through.

The comments of many of the students interviewed would probably sound all too familiar to the adults. “They teach you things that you’re never really going to use,” said one student. Another student complained he had, “No idea what to expect in life after high school and college.”

Most parents were unfamiliar with “applied learning” as a term but had little trouble understanding the concept when it was explained to them. For some, applied learning meant more than giving kids
a chance to see how classroom learning was useful outside of school. They thought it was a good way to foster cognitive learning. The father of a special education child recalled how that child learned addition and subtraction faster than his other children because the teacher taught basic math by taking students to the grocery store and had them count their change.

**Teachers' Ambivalence Toward Applied Learning**

The administrators interviewed (principals and superintendents) anticipated teacher resistance to the initiative and to applied learning.

Principals thought teachers would be comfortable with traditional methods of instruction and that many were not adequately trained to implement applied learning properly. "I don't think the faculty can do applied learning, they need training," said a principal. "I think faculty are afraid because it's unknown territory." Another principal who had already implemented a work site mentor program with local government thought his students loved it. But "the problem is the staff, they're not in synch," he said. According to him, teachers believed these collaborative programs took away from necessary academic learning. One superintendent also thought that teachers resisted such programs because they represented competition and alternative ways of teaching that were not dependent upon them. There was also anticipation that teachers would not be willing to take on additional work without compensation.

As it turned out, reactions to applied learning were decidedly mixed among the teachers interviewed. Their most immediate concern was a pragmatic one — with everything else they have to do, they feared this would be an additional burden. Said one teacher, "I don't have much time to do more real-life things because I have to teach the Regents. My hands are tied." Applied learning meant writing new lessons, they pointed out: "We don't have time to come up with curriculum," said one. But teachers' resistance was driven not only by practical problems.

Other teachers objected on the grounds of principle: "I don't want to teach a class on job resumes...I want to teach them the beauty of the sonnet form and what Shakespeare has to offer them. And applied learning...it's demeaning to the discipline. Applied to what? What about reading the great works or history?"

The administrators themselves soundly supported applied learning and workplace programs. Several principals who were exposed to a version of it through the WISE program spoke positively about their experiences. The superintendents were generally positive as well. One sought to use such programs to fundamentally reorient teaching while another thought these would be nice "addons" that should not distract the schools from their main mission of teaching the basics.
III. The Business-Education Relationship

Many respondents acknowledged that business was unhappy with the quality of potential employees but there was substantial suspicion of any business involvement in education that went beyond donating money.

Recognition That Business is not Happy

There was an overwhelming recognition that the business community was not satisfied with the quality of potential employees they were getting. Some educators and parents agreed with these criticisms, and thought too many students were graduating with insufficient skills and abilities. “I don’t think they are as satisfied, and I don’t think the work ethic is what it used to be either. People don’t know what a hard day’s work is,” said a parent. But others went on to criticize business for sniping without offering solutions.

Many teachers resented the way business expressed its unhappiness. They thought the business community had not taken enough responsibility for communicating its needs. “Why don’t they put their money where their mouth is? Why don’t they tell us what they need, rather than this outside criticism?” complained one teacher. One principal did not think business really help: “IBM helps with small pieces, it’s not enough and doesn’t solve the problem — programs are piecemeal.”

Suspicion of Business

Many of the parents, teachers, and to some extent principals were deeply suspicious of active business involvement in education policymaking. Their misgivings stemmed from several sources: distrust of the motives for business involvement, concern that the values of the business culture run counter to the values of the education culture, and doubts over how committed business really was to the schools.

Teachers felt deeply uncomfortable about opening school doors to business involvement in school policies and curricula. They were afraid that business values would have a pernicious influence on the school culture. One teacher voiced his qualms by asking rhetorically: “Are the lessons of business what schools should teach? Are the ravages of the industrial revolution, the Machiavellianism of business practices, are these the lessons we should teach kids?” Other teachers perceived business involvement as a challenge to their professionalism. Their thinking was: ‘who are they to be telling us how to do our jobs?’ Or as one teacher said, “I wouldn’t tell NYNEX how to run their business.”

Some parents were also suspicious of business intentions and motives. Said one parent: “What’s the motivation for the business to come in? Just to get an early grasp on the kids they need...Like this Channel 1, with commercials every 10 minutes. My kids see enough commercials on TV and now they have more sales pitches at school.” Another parent was even more cynical: “Is their involvement training or is it union busting? Are we going to send out all our carpentry students to places and undercut the unions?”

The “suspect motives” theme was a recurring one, and came up in the principals’ focus group as well. One principal thought businesses were often disingenuous about working with schools and driven by self-interest. “The true partnership is not there...schools are taking the blame and not forcing businesses into the partnerships,” he said.

Some Call for Cooperation

The superintendents were the only stakeholders clearly comfortable with business involvement. Even there, one superintendent added a cautious proviso that business values not supplant education’s emphasis on liberal arts. There were countervailing voices in the other groups urging the inclusion of a business perspective. “We’ve got people with knowledge out there that the kids need,” said one parent in reference to business people. “We need a way of getting new knowledge into the educational system.” Another parent said, “I think feedback to educators from business would be helpful: This is what we’ve seeing, what we’re not getting.” Technology is changing so fast, educators need to be constantly re-grounded.”
The principals and teachers also called for cooperation, but they usually assumed that business would be high-handed, and try to dictate rather than collaborate. "The true partnership is not there," said one principal. "There's a catch phrase — partnership," said a teacher. "If they put their cards on the table and said 'we need kids who have these skills, we're not coming in to tell you how to run schools. What can you do?' That's a marriage made in heaven."

**Philanthropy First and Maybe Last**

To be sure, there was only approval for a "philanthropic" business-education relationship. People were enthusiastic about businesses donating equipment to the schools or sending representatives to a career day. In fact, this was typically the first reaction when the discussion of business-education relationship began. A parent said, "Business days or career days, maybe once a month to say what the key things we need are, to make sure kids are not using old technology."

Some did not think businesses had measured up on the philanthropic front and still needed to prove their bona fides by financially contributing to the schools. "I'd like to see businesses contribute to schools by donating computers and money," said one parent. "The PTA sent letters to every business to contribute financially, and we only got two responses. I don't think they contribute their share. I don't think they've even tried to prove themselves."

For many however, this was also where the relationship should end. "If they want to send money, great," said one teacher. "But the moment they come into the schools the end of school becomes business, and I think school has a more important purpose: to acculturate students."
IV. Conclusions and Implications

What conclusions can be drawn about the outlook for a school-to-work initiative in Westchester? Even with the limited number of focus groups and interviews, some themes clearly emerged.

Not surprisingly, there was a general unfamiliarity with the work-to-school initiative among parents and to a lesser extent among teachers. This may be one source of the confusion or misunderstandings over key elements of the program.

Perhaps the most critical problem confronting a school-to-work initiative is that parents and teachers are predisposed to lump it together with vocational training programs. If this link persists, the initiative may end up with little prestige and limited impact. For one thing, vocational training programs are generally stigmatized, and seen as something to be avoided. For another, most parents seem to view college as a requisite, not an option. They would tend to steer their children away from a program they perceive is not intended for the college bound. Finally, the principals and teachers sense their schools’ success is measured by how the percentage of kids who go on to college, not the percentage of kids able to succeed in the workplace. A program that does not contribute to that front may get short shrift.

The superintendents and the principals interviewed supported the initiative. Some saw it as a fundamental reorientation of the schools while others saw it as a useful addition to current teaching practices. But if the initial focus group findings are confirmed, teachers may strongly resist elements of a work-to-school initiative and for several reasons. They worry that implementing applied learning in the curriculum will mean more work without compensation. Many teachers (and parents) seem instinctively suspicious of business involvement that goes beyond career day and grant making. Finally, some think the initiative will erode traditional academic learning in the classrooms.

There was some sense among the teachers that the school-to-work initiative was simply another fad that top administrators would force upon them. Like other school districts where Public Agenda has conducted studies, teachers carry with them jaundiced memories of past reform efforts. They want input into future reforms but suspect they will be handed directives instead.

The most attractive features of the work-to-school initiative are its reliance on applied learning — a term that was not familiar to most citizens — and internships and workplace experiences. These features held broad appeal. Students, parents, and principals were enthusiastic about connecting academic learning to the real world. Applied learning promised to make academic subjects relevant to many who have struggled to justify the need for such learning. Students and parents especially liked the notion of previewing alternative careers paths. Most appealing was the notion that such programs would strengthen students’ work ethic and work habits.

The research points to some implications on how a work-to-school initiative might be implemented.

The initiative might do well to give teachers the opportunity for real input at important phases of the process. Teachers might then view the initiative as at least partly their own. Their involvement, along with that of other stakeholders, may signal that the initiative is a long term commitment by the community and not a fad. Teachers are also a key link to parents.

The business community still has work to do before it can claim the trust of teachers, parents and principles as a legitimate stakeholder in the realm of schools issues and policies. The focus group participants saw Westchester business as a potential money source at best or as a sinister influence at worst.

One important theme was that workplace experiences and learning were most appropriate in the final stages of high school. The assumption was that academic learning had been taken care of by then, and students had more free time. People did not seem to have thought much about the notion that workplace experiences could take the place of some classroom learning.
Virtually all groups stressed it was important to maintain the voluntary nature of workplace experiences and learning. The sense was it was important not to make such programs mandatory because that would take the fun out of it.

The schools seemed to be caught up in a circle of expectations. On the one hand, people say they want the public schools to offer alternatives to college because not everyone belongs there. On the other hand, most parents want the schools to direct their own children to college, and most principals and teachers perceive a successful public education to graduate students who go on to college.

Implementing a school-to-work initiative that is voluntary but enlists a broad base of students is a challenge. The key may be the direct experiences of the students, parents and teachers who participate in the program and the stories they bring back to their community. The parent whose negative perceptions of a business program changed after seeing its results first-hand may be instructive. The school-to-work initiative is a national effort but education is still a local enterprise. “Word-of-mouth” prestige among local stakeholders may be the best route to reform.
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