

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building Supports for Successful Transitions Into the Workforce:

Community Conversations with Business Leaders & Parents



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The inextricable link between America's education and workforce systems has become increasingly clear in recent years: success in the workforce depends upon success in the education system. Yet pathways that value lifelong learning, and prepare individuals for a successful, rewarding, financially secure career remain out of reach for many students.

In 2017, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) embarked upon a "listening tour" of business leaders and parents to discuss firsthand information about workplace demands and aspirations for high school graduates. With generous funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the listening tour made stops in five communities over the course of a year: Oakland, CA; Westfield, MA; Tupelo, MS; Marysville, OH; and Norfolk, VA. In each community, 90-minute facilitated discussions were conducted to identify strategies for increasing the effectiveness of business engagement, and to identify the information and supports parents' need to ensure student success in the workplace—and to leave each community with a potential path for continued dialogue.

There were striking similarities across all five communities from coast to coast when examining the goals and aspirations for students shared by parents and business leaders. Strategies often aligned, as well. Yet, each group brought a distinct perspective that reflected the culture and values of the community, as well as the economic landscape. In examining the ideas shared by participants, the underlying theme is unmistakable: There is a significant gap between what parents and employers want, and what high schools are delivering.

Prevailing Themes

Parents' goals and expectations for their children after high school centered around four main themes:

- Being happy and successful in a career,
- Gaining financial independence,
- Embracing learning as a lifelong endeavor, and
- Being a good person: having a disposition toward serving others, acting in an ethical manner, and embracing family and community values.

Business leaders' goals and expectations for employees centered around two main themes:

- Demonstrating soft skills upon entry into the workforce, and
- Being a good person: having a disposition toward treating others with respect, being service-oriented, honest, and positive.

The strategies that parents and business leaders developed for improving career readiness across communities shared some commonalities, as well:

- Improving communication among stakeholders about career pathways within the region, beginning as early as elementary school,
- Hosting career fairs to inform students, parents, and educators about available careers within the region,
- Providing the full range of work-based learning opportunities to students,
- Improving counseling and mentoring focused on career readiness, and
- Modeling and reinforcing soft skills and dispositions for students.

Recommendations

The common thread running throughout the five communities was a goal of helping students navigate a path toward a successful, rewarding career. Below are recommendations for community action drawn from the many ideas shared by participants throughout the listening tour:

- **Coordination & Collaboration Among Stakeholders.** From regional government, to business and industry, to schools, to parents, to students, better collaboration and coordination of efforts is needed to improve outcomes for students.
- **Communication Among Stakeholders.** Communities need an intermediary to serve as a conduit for gathering and sharing information, as well as a strategic plan for communicating information about career pathways and available career opportunities.
- **Tools, Resources, & Supports to Identify Career Pathways.** On a more global scale, students, parents, and businesses need tools, resources, and supports to help them develop a community-based plan for addressing career readiness. In the interim, communities on the listening tour universally identified one specific support as an urgent need: counselors and/or mentors who can help students identify and chart a career pathway.
- **Work-Based Learning Opportunities.** Parents and business leaders expressed support for providing students with opportunities to experience the full continuum of work-based learning experiences, from awareness, to exploration, to training, and finally preparation.
- **Development of Soft Skills.** Communities on the listening tour universally stressed the importance of soft skills. The list varied from one community to the next, but frequently included: being honest, being motivated, showing resilience, having a positive attitude, being a continuous learner, being service-oriented, the ability to problem solve and manage conflict, and possessing time management skills. Indeed, business leaders repeatedly identified soft skills as one of, if not the most important, factors in hiring. Yet, students often lack many of the skills needed in today's workplace, and in life.

The listening tour stopped in only five communities, but the common goals and aspirations shared from community to community revealed a shared hope for students as they chart a course for the future. Throughout the listening tour, parents and business leaders echoed the value of coming together to discuss the topic of career readiness. In each discussion, there was a deep understanding that the success or failure of students to thrive in the workplace impacts everyone, from the individual student, to their parents, their neighbors, and more globally, the entire community and economy. These conversations were small in size and scope, yet it was clear that participants share common objectives and ideas for improving the career readiness of students.

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