

Educational Vocational Models for Building Workforce Competencies

Penny Kardon, Jayne Siniari, and Cynthia Jobe 05 April
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Introduction

One corollary to the nation's current high unemployment rate is the even more acute problem of joblessness among youth age 16–24 (Covenant House Institute 2009). In Philadelphia, some estimates place that number at over 20 percent. As the region's economy recovers, albeit slowly, job prospects for some will improve. However, the outlook for many young people who lack the skills to compete in the current labor market is not as bright.

Research demonstrates that an individual's education and skills training levels significantly affect employability and earning potential (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). With an increasing demand for an information-based workforce, persons without at least a high school diploma are at a serious economic disadvantage, the fiscal and social implications of which have been well documented. (See Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board http://pwib.org/data_publications/ and Philadelphia

Youth Network <http://www.pyninc.org/programs/21st-century.php>.)

Some jobs with above-average earnings do not require a bachelor's degree, but most require substantial training (between six months and a year). In addition to requiring technical training, workers in the new economy must possess a more varied skill set that includes professionalism, the ability to collaborate, and strong written and verbal communications. The paradox in today's employment market is that at the same time that we have near-record unemployment rates, employers say that they still have difficulty finding enough new workers who possess these "21st-century" skills. This mismatch between labor force supply and demand has sparked efforts to develop effective practices that provide out-of-school and at-risk youth with learning opportunities that will lead to postsecondary education and career pathways.

The fact that so many of today's youth are not prepared to enter postsecondary education or the workforce is of great concern to policymakers, educators and business leaders. In response to this crisis, a number of innovative approaches to building workforce competencies are emerging. JEVS Human Services' approach to bridging the skill gap is represented by two evidence-based programs funded by the Philadelphia Youth Network.

Educational Vocational Models That Wor

Educational Vocational Models That Work: World of Work (WOW)

Using evidenced-based, project-based and contextualized learning, Project WOW engages out-of-school youth, providing them with academic skills training in reading and math, GED preparation, and training in the trade of property maintenance, leading to a diploma. The project targets 18- to 21-year-old out-of-school youth who face significant challenges, including a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills, early parenting, prior criminal records, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness.

Project WOW takes place at JEVS' state-of-the-art trades school, Orleans Technical Institute, located in Northeast Philadelphia. The learning space reinforces the curriculum: The property maintenance classroom is set up as a maintenance shop equipped with carpentry, electrical and plumbing tools that youth learn to operate with care. Youth learn practical maintenance skills in the property maintenance trade including framing, drywall, painting, tiling, fixing faucets and toilets, installing electrical switches, and basic wiring, completing all the steps required for mastery of these skills.

At the same time youth receive instruction in reading and math and GED preparation. The occupational literacy skills approach contextualizes instruction and helps build career development opportunities in the property maintenance profession. In addition, students have the

chance to practice their trade skills through volunteering to repair and weatherize homes and to participate in field trips to jobs sites and discussions led by volunteers of the Employer Advisory Committee, members of Orleans staff and Project WOW graduates. During the job readiness component of the program, youth develop resumes, learn job search techniques, and practice interviewing with real employers who volunteer their time.

Program components include academic, vocational and psychosocial assessment; individual goal planning; academic and GED instruction; training in building maintenance; career readiness and job search practice; case management; and wraparound services. Youth receive referrals to needed services including child care, transportation passes, clothing, and substance abuse recovery to help them succeed in completing the program.

Results

Since the first class in 2004, WOW has enrolled 149 youth, produced 120 (81 percent) graduates and on average places 63 percent of graduates in jobs. Students completing the program typically progress two levels on literacy and numeracy. Graduates stay connected to the program and encourage current students to stick with the program. Many graduates of this program also complete their GED at the same time.

Educational Vocational Models That Work: 21st Century PASS Program

The aim of the PASS(Preparing, Attaining and Sustaining Success) program is to ensure that students graduate from high school with skills and abilities to succeed in the 21st-century economy. Using the evidence-based framework of the 21st Century Skills model, this program helps build skills in seven areas: 1) professionalism/work ethic, 2) collaboration/teamwork, 3) leadership, 4) ethics/social responsibility, 5) social networking, 6) written communication and 7) IT applications. JEVS adheres to the goals of the 21st Century model, but complements it with a holistic, multidisciplinary approach. Our goal is not just to get students to graduate from high school, though that is critical. As a human service provider, we believe it is our responsibility to provide them with the wraparound services that will help them overcome the persistent barriers that hinder achievement.

In this program, JEVS collaborates with George Washington High School in Northeast Philadelphia. Students referred to the PASS program are economically disadvantaged and usually have a variety of barriers that may include unstable housing, homelessness, broken families, hunger, poor study habits, babysitting pressure and a multitude of issues that interfere with focused learning. Of the first cohort of 24 students, 18 were constantly moving, had adults move in and out of their

lives, had phones and utilities disconnected; one student became homeless. Basic needs often must be met before educational attainment is possible.

The PASS program incorporates several components, including career and education assessment, basic academic tutoring in reading and math, 21st Century Skills workshops, group and individual career support that results in college or vocational school enrollment or job placement, SAT preparation, hands-on service learning, and summer and school-year internships. The program operates with a drop-in center for extra tutoring and an open-door policy so that students can get as much help as they need.

JEVS' assessment process is very thorough and includes interest inventory, psychosocial, barrier scale and academic skills ratings. The assessment allows us to tailor learning to individual students, to determine the appropriate wraparound services for each student, and to guide the students toward a path where they are most likely to experience success. Students meet with program staff for college/community college counseling, to explore trade and other post-high school training opportunities, and to enhance work-ready skills for employment placements. In addition, the students gain practical on-the-job experience and develop work histories.

Results

Though only in its second year, the program shows positive results. Of the original cohort of 24 students, all remain actively engaged in the program. In addition, 91 percent are expected to complete the program, exceeding the 85 percent target completion goal. Students will complete the program in August 2011, but already this year six students have been accepted into four-year colleges, one student has applied for admission to community college and two students are pursuing the Armed Forces.

Why the Model Works: Lessons for Replication

Why the Model Works: Lessons for Replication

Project WOW is not at all like school, where the youth failed; here they engage in the program at a high level. In addition to evidence-based design and the use of best practices, this engagement is in large part due to the program leader, who nurtures and respects the youth but holds them accountable. She calls the students when they miss sessions and does not let them off the hook.

While the best practices described in both programs are certainly factors in their success, the “glue” is our program leaders, who create a nurturing and supportive environment where students feel safe. This is critical, because for many students, this may be the only place

where they will find safety, consistency, stability and encouragement. Students are empowered and build the confidence that many lack when they come to the program. In our view, a nurturing and supportive environment is one in which dedicated staff work with youth and their social support systems to help them start to believe in themselves, a critical component of developing self-agency to take control of their own lives. We do not just provide instruction and training—we help youth overcome obstacles to engaging, to trust us, and to eventually come to us for support on their own without much effort on our part. Staff never hesitates to reach out to the youth's family, support team, school counselors and other potential resources for the youth. This goes a long way toward helping youth begin to build social capital

A recent observer asked our PASS program how such a homogenous group of staff could relate so effectively with such a diverse group of students including Iranians, Pakistanis, African Americans, former Soviets and Latinos. The observer stated: "I cannot bottle what you do; you are not only their teachers, you are their mothers and their friends." Passionate and talented program staff who are capable of stretching their role beyond instruction and meeting youth where they are, as mentors and friends, is often the magic ingredient for helping youth build the social capital needed for transitioning.

In work with immigrants, language barriers present cumbersome challenges. Some immigrant parents are

uneasy sharing private information, so providing the documentation for enrollment poses obstacles. The use of interpreters could ease this burden, but interpretation services are expensive. In addition, poor families have problems that make daily study extremely challenging for students, some of whom have to work in addition to attending school, caring for siblings or other family members, and managing without internet access or shelter for studying. It is not uncommon for students to have to move from place to place or suddenly be without heat, water and basic shelter.

Social Impact

Programs that invest broadly and deeply in helping youth overcome barriers to achieve educational success and work readiness require a heavy investment of human and financial capital. Both of the projects described are very expensive to operate because of the extensive nature of investment in the students—the very reasons the programs produce strong outcomes.

A recent study by the Penn State Prevention Research Center (Carpenter 2008) shows that a program similar to WOW or PASS, which takes youth off the street, reduces arrests, welfare payments and social service usage, and increases employment and subsequent tax revenue, not only pays for itself but generates a significant return on investment of between \$1 and \$26 for every dollar spent. From a public policy perspective, greater emphasis should

be placed on the social return on investment of successful programs that avert a host of costly societal problems caused when young people are idle and on building effective holistic systems for taking successful programs to scale.

Taking Vocational Models to Scale

How can programs like those discussed here make a larger impact for youth in our community? Project WOW can be replicated with any hard skill training component combined with a contextualized instruction. Building maintenance presents a particularly easy training skill to replicate, because it does not involve huge infrastructure and equipment costs. Training space and instructors are key cost outlays.

Leveraging support and wraparound services through partnerships is another way to reduce costs. Components of the PASS 21st Century Skills Curriculum can be implemented in a variety of settings and can be integrated with work and/or service learning.

Nevertheless, neither of these programs is a franchise model. Successful scaling requires adopting tested curriculum and best practices, selecting star-quality mentors and program staff, developing individualized "care" plans aimed at barrier reduction and scaffolding trust to engage students to think about and prepare for careers and/or higher education. Finding creative ways to

scale successful vocational models is critical to preparing youth for the skills they will need to compete in the workforce.

Penny Kardon, MS, is Director of Youth Services and Career Strategies at JEVS Human Services. Under her leadership, the youth emphasis of CS programs, including the 21st Century PASS program, has substantially enlarged.

Jayne Siniari is the Director of Orleans Technical Institute, a nationally licensed and accredited career school offering programs in the skilled trades, telecommunications, court reporting and human services. Siniari works closely with employers to design programs that meet workplace needs and has led the school through accreditation, expansion and continual improvement to meet the needs of students and employers.

Cynthia Jobe, MS, is Senior Grant Professional in the Business and Fund Development Department at JEVS. She works closely with JEVS program leaders to design and conceptualize new programs and to secure funding for JEVS programs. Jobe currently spearheads youth planning initiatives at JEVS.

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