

## conference proceedings

### High Skills/High Wages: Building the Foundation for a Stronger American Economy

#### Overview

On December 11, 2008, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, hosted a conference of 50 top state policymakers, employers, workforce development leaders, and educators to discuss the workforce challenges of a 21st Century economy. Conference participants sought to identify specific steps that could be taken in New Jersey and nationwide to ensure that workers at all levels have the skills they need to compete in a rapidly changing, innovation-based economy.

The High Skills/High Wages audience heard from leaders of business, education, and state government working to better align New Jersey's school curricula with the new realities of a competitive global market. Speakers included:

- Dr. Carl Van Horn, Professor and Director of the Heldrich Center
- Dennis Bone, President of Verizon New Jersey and Chair of the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission
- David Socolow, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development
- Lucille Davy, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Education
- Jane Oates, Executive Director, New Jersey Commission on Higher Education

#### New Skill Requirements of Employers

During the past seven years, the Heldrich Center has conducted more than 300 employer interviews, facilitated more than 20 industry advisory council meetings, and analyzed labor market data to determine the priority skill needs and workforce challenges of key industries. This research has been summarized in more than 20 reports on the workforce and skill needs of key industries, including health care, life sciences, construction, transportation and logistics, and nanotechnology. The majority of these reports are a part of the *Ready for the Job* initiative, a project of the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission, in partnership with other state agencies and departments.

At the conference, Heldrich Center researchers Aaron Fichtner, Ph.D. and Jennifer Cleary summarized this body of research and described how trends in technology and business restructuring have led to a new set of foundational skills expected from workers at all levels. These foundational skills include:

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- Adaptability skills,
- Information management and communication/relationship-building skills,
- Business skills,
- Math/science/engineering/technology skills, and
- Interdisciplinary skills.

## The Challenge

There is an urgent need to develop secondary and postsecondary school curricula in New Jersey that reflects the fast-changing realities of technology, business, and the 21st Century workforce. Today's students and job seekers need even more up-to-date instruction. New content and new ways of teaching must be embraced, even in these difficult economic times, in order to educate a workforce that is ready to fill the new jobs being created both now and in the future.

## Current Solutions

New Jersey has already launched a variety of efforts to better respond to employer skill needs. These efforts, which were discussed by state policymakers at the conference, include the following:

- Seven partnerships of educational institutions in the state have been designated as the state's **Innovation Partnership Institutes** for key industries, including financial services, life sciences, information technology, transportation and logistics, and green jobs. With grants of \$150,000 each from the Commission on Higher Education, these institutes have worked closely with employers to develop new curricula to better prepare individuals for jobs.
- The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development has convened **Industry Workforce Advisory Councils** so that senior human resource executives from key sectors can describe their

critical workforce and skill needs and can provide input on solutions.

- Three regions in New Jersey have been awarded \$5 million each from the U.S. Department of Labor's **WIRED program** (Workforce Innovation for Regional Economic Development) to implement regional strategies to create a skilled workforce for key industries. The North Jersey Partners region has focused on the arts and entertainment, transportation and logistics, and health care industries. The Bio-1 region in central New Jersey and the Delaware Valley Innovation Network have focused on the life sciences industry.
- **American Diploma Project** benchmarks have been adopted by the New Jersey Department of Education to bring secondary school coursework and exams more in line with standards students will face after graduation.
- The Heldrich Center, with funding from Verizon New Jersey, has launched the **Career Connections** initiative to work closely with state staff, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to strengthen career awareness information and activities for young people.

## Potential Solutions

Following the formal presentations, conference participants attended breakout sessions that allowed them to discuss potential solutions to the state's skill challenges such as:

- Improving student curricula at the high school and college level to make lessons more relevant to 21st Century workplace tasks,
- Enhancing hands-on experiential learning in and outside the classroom,
- Integrating employers' priority skills into school career counseling, and
- Strengthening ties between educators and employers.

Four interactive breakout sessions were held and employers, state officials, and workforce development providers were able to explore skill development options together with secondary and postsecondary educators. These discussions yielded dozens of promising ideas for linking New Jersey's classrooms to 21st Century workplaces.

- **Industry-specific talent development networks**, in which workforce development organizations and educational institutions work closely with companies in key industries to develop new curricula, training programs, and provide training and education services to job seekers, students, and employers. The Heldrich Center is currently working with 22 workforce investment boards, colleges, universities, high schools, and the North Jersey Partners WIRED region from across New Jersey to implement a Transportation, Logistics, and Distribution (TLD) Talent Network to prepare individuals for jobs in goods and passenger movement.
- **Increased cooperative education and internship opportunities** for students at the high school and college level, which give young workers a greater sense of how their classroom lessons relate to important tasks on the job. Course credit should be offered where **paid** internships cannot be arranged.
- **Increased externship opportunities** for teachers and school counselors that help demonstrate the many ways that core curricula can be illustrated and enlivened through “real-world” examples in a modern workplace setting.
- **Enhanced teacher and counselor professional development training** that incorporates innovative skill information and guest speakers from industry into scheduled programs.
- **More volunteer industry experts** recruited to assist advisors and counselors at local schools and colleges.

## Next Steps

During the next year, the Heldrich Center, through its work with the Career Connections initiative, the TLD Talent Network, the WIRED regions, state agencies, and local workforce development organizations, will work to further develop and then implement the most promising solutions generated in the High Skills/High Wages breakout sessions. The ideas will be reviewed by the New Jersey employer and education organizations serving on the Career Connections steering committee. Selected ideas will then be designated “action items” to be pursued by the business-education partnership during the 2009 program year.