

A CRITIQUE OF SCHOOL-TO-WORK (STW) INTEGRATION INTO TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

STW could have been a much more effective educational effort had its proponents better understood the necessary curriculum development and implementation procedures to integrate a non-traditional subject into traditional educational subjects. STW evidently thought it was taking the best socio-political approach for accomplishing effective education integration. It did not envision the need for a comprehensive content body of knowledge or scope and sequence. It also underestimated the need for a more comprehensive inclusion of educational administrators and teachers through unique uniform professional development and involvement programs. Lastly, STW lost a valuable accountability instrument by not developing a normalized evaluation instrument, which could give important feedback to teachers of traditional educational subjects.

School to work has been successful in reinforcing educational school to work and career education programs. It has also developed business education partnerships where none existed before. This falls far short of its stated goals of creating systemic change within education but it has raised the level of dialogue necessary to promote further understanding in this important societal goal of creating a productive and educated workforce. Future federal educational efforts should be able to improve from the STW shortfalls and create a more effective design and implementation methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The need for integration between the world of work and the world of education is not a new or a unique idea. From a theoretical perspective, John Dewey believed that school and work were vitally interconnected (Dewey & Dewey, 1962; Dewey, 1990). The need for a skilled workforce seems to have been heightened in the 1990's due to the difficulty businesses have had filling employment needs due

to technological stimulated economic expansion. Recent Bureau of Labor Statistics show that 17% of adults over 25 did not finish high school and only 39.6%, of those who did not complete high school were employed in the first quarter of 1998 (School and Work, 1998). This translates into millions of adults who are not able to contribute to the nations productive capacity. The Executive Director of the nonprofit Jumpstart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy is quoted as saying "our young adults are leaving schools without the ability to make critical decisions affecting their lives" (Brenner, 1999).

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor released the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report. SCANS was a synthesis of views of business owners, business managers, union officials, and workers on the skills needed in today's changing workplace (What work..., 1991). The Department Of Labor continued its involvement in wanting to influence the educational community through its development, promotion, and involvement in STW. Two pieces of legislation assisted the Department of Labor in promoting its agenda. The first was Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) which called for every citizen to be ready for productive employment by the year 2000 (103rd Congress, 1994, March). Then in May 1994, The President of the United States signed into law the School-to-Work Opportunities Act (103rd Congress, 1994, May). While this new law could be viewed as recognition of Dewey's vision and a reaction to today's business needs, it has fallen short of its integration into traditional educational subject areas from a formative and therefore an evaluative effectiveness perspective.

THE OHIO EXPERIENCE

Ohio is divided into twelve regional funding districts, each with an Executive Committee with the main functions of overseeing fiscal, administrative, and program responsibilities. As a member of the Region 9 Executive Committee of the Ohio School to Work effort and as a representative of Higher Education on that committee, the author has participated in the development of the STW for five county areas in Northeast Ohio. As Chairman of the Grants Committee, the author has also overseen the development, awarding and conduct of STW grants since 1996.

The Region 9 Executive Committee has representatives from designated "stakeholder" groups. These represented groups are business, labor, education, community based organizations, higher education, parents and, for the formation period, one student. The Region 9 Executive Committee was faced with a hurried timeline to define our mission, develop our structure, procure a fiscal agent, discover what was already being done in activities, which could complement STW, advertise and hire a Region 9 Director, and develop a request for proposals to dispense several hundred thousands of dollars in school district grants, all in a matter of several

months. These details are not to imply that the granted programs were not effective in introducing teachers to STW or that the grant participants did not obtain good information to impart to their students. There have been documented successes in STW within vocational/technical education and career education areas (Filipczak, 1993; Owens, 1995; Hershey, Silverberg & Haimson, 1999). These successes are however are not concept attainment measured. As one strong supporter, the Director of the National Center on Education and the Economy Workforce Development Program based in Washington D. C. stated in defending STW, "We sometimes failed to make the case for contextual learning that maintains a high academic standard. Too many schools got caught up in developing projects and activities without connecting those activities to rigorous academic standards" (Barnicle, 1999). STW has hedged its accountability by claiming that it was not a program but was an approach to education that involved preparing students to enter an ever-changing high skilled work force. This is to be done by combining academic learning with work-based/career education experiences in partnership with the above mentioned stakeholder groups (Partnership Resource Directory, 1996).

STW was designed to create systemic change within the educational system, however, who was ultimately responsible for STW was never clearly explained. Most traditional subject teachers believed STW was a vocational education program trying to infiltrate their subject areas, while many vocational educators thought STW was an attempt to do away with their program. There was also wide spread mistrust of STW from parents, who saw STW as federal/state intrusion into local education in an effort to put work based education over subject based learning and micromanage the education of their children (Steinberg, 1998).

STW EVALUATION

STW, from its outset, did not contain the necessary development patterns to insure its complete acceptance by traditional educational subject teachers and administrators or parent/teacher associations (Vannatta et al. 1998; Mason & Thorn, 1997). The nationally contracted evaluator of STW, in its 1999 evaluation report, found that job shadowing, work site visitations, and career awareness have been given the most common educational emphasis. It also found that STW could not be evaluated in terms of these job shadowing and work site visitation activities to cause a change in student outcomes (Hershey et al. 1999).

A comprehensive state level evaluation in Wisconsin spoke to the lack of accountability and the difficulty of the ascertaining costs associated with STW as well as citing major problems with the integration of STW in traditional subject areas. Among its findings among school district curriculum directors were that over seventy percent thought STW had no impact on the curriculum, a lack of interest

among traditional subject teachers in STW, and an inequitable emphasis of STW for teachers in vocational, technical, and business education. There was a one hundred percent agreement, among school curriculum directors, that STW could not provide reliable data concerning student change in achievement, attendance, or school completion rates (Schug & Western, 1999).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE FEDERAL EFFORTS IN EDUCATION

STW tried to create an educational intervention that would be defined by each regional location chosen to implement the STW idea. It is obvious by the data that the federal designers of STW did not fully understand the process by which to implement change in traditional subject areas, nor does their project contain the necessary elements for creating systemic curriculum change within education. All informal indications are that STW will be phased out by 2001. For future federal/state involvement in a new academic educational effort, the following suggestions may prove to be more effective in promoting change with the educational community.

Develop a concentrated effort to impact preservice teacher education programs within higher education

This need was recognized for STW in Ohio (A Framework ..., 1999). Such an effort would be proactive in assimilating new educational instructional material in traditional subject areas by making all new teacher graduates knowledgeable about the new material content and how it applies to the subject they will be teaching. Integrating new subject material in teacher preservice programs can only be accomplished by making professors in teacher education programs knowledgeable in the new content and instructional methodology. STW placed a person to represent higher education on the regional executive committee. This representation, and subsequent state grants to implement STW, within teacher education programs, has been inadequate in engendering faculty implementation support. New federal/state efforts need to make allowance for greater professorial inclusion and knowledge building within the professorial ranks.

Develop a definitive body of knowledge

Traditional subject teachers instruct from an outline of concepts and principles within their various disciplines. Without a defined concept base, it is extremely difficult for educators to identify concept instruction methodology that

creates integration between subjects. It is unrealistic to think that teachers have the time and ability to integrate a new subject with the one they are teaching without a body of knowledge being provided. In the case of STW, job shadowing and business visitations may be a good introduction, but more detailed concept instruction and methodological development is required. A body of knowledge would provide any new federal/state effort with a needed base of reference for dialogue, instruction, and methodology integration.

Provide a scope and sequence for the new educational material

A scope and sequence divides the subject into age and subject appropriate concepts. This allows the program to develop a K-12 approach to integration with traditional educational subjects. The scope and sequence approach also allows for more comprehensive student concept attainment due to the process itself. The student receives new integrated subject material during each school year. Yearly concept instruction provides content repetition and cognitive reinforcement from a variety of traditional subject areas. The scope and sequence also allows teachers to see the progression of content area development from simple, in the early educational years, to increasingly complex in the later learning years.

Develop professional development prototypes to stimulate teacher participation

STW depended mainly on business visitations and job shadowing to promote teacher understanding of the world of work. Teacher business visitations and job shadowing have been used for decades by vocational/career and economic educators. In these instances, STW has only reinforced ongoing professional development programs, it has not created systemic change either in the vocational/career/technical fields or within traditional subject areas. Since STW had no innovative prototype for professional development, it was bound to be used by ongoing programs to further what they were already doing. Any new federal/state educational effort would be wise to design and implement a unique and a creative professional development plan.

Develop and implement an educational administration involvement plan

Any educational initiative needs to involve central administration from the school board through the curriculum coordinator positions. STW was derived and administered from outside the states' departments of education. This resulted in administrative confusion as to who was responsible for the effort and what authority the regional executive committees possessed to implement STW instructional efforts.

Any new federal effort will have to more professionally involve school administrations and see that they are empowered strategically within the new initiative. Curriculum directors and traditional subject area coordinators need to receive specific content and methodology instruction to insure effective subject integration into ongoing instruction. Administrators need to see any educational effort as supplemental and supportive of their current instructional design.

Develop a definitive concept evaluation plan through the use of subject normalized tests

Traditional subject teachers are used to concept testing to ascertain their instructional effectiveness. Any program that does not contain a specific content evaluation instrument is viewed, in many cases, as inferior and looked upon skeptically by teachers and administrators alike. The development of a body of knowledge and scope and sequence will naturally lead to the development of a concept evaluation instrument. The evaluation instrument should be correlated with any student state proficiency exams, for which administrators and teachers are responsible. STW did not envision such an instrument and therefore gave up a valuable accountability instrument to justify its inclusion in academic subject areas. Any new federal/state educational effort should have such an instrument.

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