

Work-Based Learning for 16-24 Year Olds

Minnesota Focus Groups

Minnesota's NGA Talent Pipeline Policy Academy is made up of senior leaders from these state agencies: Department of Education, Office of Higher Education, Minnesota State Colleges & Universities, Employment & Economic Development, Labor & Industry, Human Services and Human Rights.

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Background

Minnesota's NGA Talent Pipeline Policy Academy is comprised of leadership from seven state agencies and works toward a vision of a healthy economy, where all Minnesotans have or are on a path to meaningful employment and a family-sustaining wage, and where all employers are able to fill jobs in demand.

In advancing the education to employment continuum, the Policy Academy determined that two strategic areas are essential to success: students to be ready for careers and postsecondary education and for all Minnesotans to complete some post-high school or industry recognized credential. The Academy has taken an inter-departmental approach to improving all aspects of work-based learning (WBL) for 16-24 year olds. For the adult population, the state has a priority on developing a career pathways system with a focus on programming that informs, connects, and develops the skills of all jobseekers but specifically those with greatest barriers to employment. Career pathways provide many supports through better alignment and leveraging of resources across public systems and education to develop skills and better opportunities for employment in occupations in key industry sectors.

Introduction

This White Paper documents the Policy Academy's efforts to better understanding the challenges and opportunities for WBL initiatives and programs for 16-24 year olds, as experienced in three different Minnesota communities. The sessions were hosted by the local workforce organizations. Invitations to participate in the two-hour focus group were sent to key stakeholders and program partners. Each session began with a panel of knowledgeable program leaders updating the group on local efforts. To maintain focus on the Policy Academy's goal of improvement of existing efforts, it was decided to include employers in a future session.

Chisholm, Minnesota [May 4 - 37 participants]

Chisholm is a core city of a mining region known as Minnesota's Iron Range. Education representatives (from counselors, teachers and superintendents to program administrators) were in the majority. Chisholm and the Iron Range were selected to host a focus group due to its established regional identity and recognition of decades of collaboration amongst private, non-profit and public sectors to reduce the region's employment dependence on mining.

The group identified opportunities for increased collaboration and participation through a stronger alignment between high demand sectors and high school vocational curriculum. From those currently delivering WBL opportunities through schools and local non-profits, state education policies were cited as barriers in a number of areas like teacher training and licensure, graduation standards and counselor knowledge of labor market information.

Worthington, Minnesota [May 5 – 35 participants]

Worthington is a county seat in the heart of southwestern Minnesota’s agricultural region. The region, which competes with South Dakota and North Dakota for growth and population, is also home to a number of major food-processing plants. Worthington was selected for a focus group session due to these unique characteristics as well as a rapid diversification of its workforce and school populations.

This group included representatives from housing, economic development, local government, education and program agencies. The conversation was more holistic than Chisholm’s and ranged from family expectations about high school and career training to aligning programs to provide the necessary training. Workplace safety and state education policies were cited as barriers to engaging some employers. Overall, the group recognized that employers must perceive a return on investment that outweighs funding and staffing fluctuations that can occur with work-based learning programs.

Minneapolis, Minnesota [May 6 – 9 participants]

The Minneapolis Workforce Council chose to gather a small group of successful partners to establish a focus on the future. Participants included program agencies and education which are funded through mixes of taxes, grants and formula-based aid. Statistically, Minneapolis is often blended in with the 10-county region, making it difficult to use established data to track trends and progress.

The group cited education licensing, curriculum and graduation standards as current barriers to broader participation by eligible students. Minneapolis was the only group to raise the topic of data privacy as a barrier to coordinating services across agencies for young people. They also identified the following as affiliated stakeholders: housing, juvenile detention services, philanthropy and youth. They concluded that success comes through relationships and trust and that improved collaborative efforts would yield results in funding, participation and employer engagement.

Challenges Shared

1. At the local/regional level, there is no single entity that is designated to coordinate WBL programming, promotion, planning and funding.
2. At the local/regional levels, there is no comprehensive plan that asserts a vision for developing an approach for filling essential service jobs that meets needs of local employers and retains local youth in the area.
 - a. Efforts continue to be disparate and often competitive.
 - b. Appeals for state, federal or philanthropic funding are weak against more organized social concerns.
 - c. Private sector employers (particularly smaller businesses) are unconvinced that their participation in WBL Initiatives bears a return on their investment.
3. State laws and policies across many departments impede the introduction of school-age learners into the workplace. These policies include workplace safety, liability and union participation.

- a. For students still in high school, state law and policies around standardized testing, teacher training, graduation requirements, availability of modern equipment, career counseling services, coordination with other programs that serve at-risk youth and transportation were noted.
 - b. To re-orient popular thought and family expectations toward vocational training and associate degrees, labor market information (LMI) needs to be more accessible. All groups voiced concern that families, counselors and leaders do not have a fact-based grasp of today's job market and what schooling is required to secure good-paying jobs.
4. Experience has shown that private sector employer engagement varies across the state, by industry and size. Larger employers are better represented. Smaller employers understand the urgency but lack incentive to create WBL opportunities for local youth.

High Level Solution: All Partners Need to Be at the Table

The following recommendations form a prospective work plan that advances WBL across its many stakeholders: youth, employers and program partners. Though they would require introductory conversations among scores of regional stakeholder groups, these work plans are intended to serve local or regional leaders and be available for all public education entities.

1. Establish Work-Based Learning for 16-24 year olds as the #1 priority among Workforce organizations and other lead employment/training agencies throughout the state.
2. Continue inter-departmental collaboration within state government to identify timelines and processes by which policies that pose the greatest obstacles can be adjusted. Determine what reform requires legislative versus departmental action. Determine stakeholders who are impacted and engage conversations that advance the understanding of Work-Based Learning's significance in the state economy.
3. Within the Department of Employment and Economic Development, boldly deliver Labor Market Information to youth audiences and young parents using methods and messaging that cuts through the clutter. Adjust for literacy and language needs.
4. Elevate the private sector as the stakeholder in greatest need of engagement.

Solution Details

1. Lead local/regional organizations and local identified champions, would:
 - a. Take advantage of existing structures, networks and relationships to create 3-year planning cycles.
 - b. Plan to leverage local resources in pursuit of government or philanthropic funding that addresses the most urgent challenges and high-potential opportunities.
 - c. Include grassroots advocacy around state and federal policies identified as obstacles.
2. Within state government, continue to work of Minnesota's NGA Policy Academy to:
 - a. Identify improvement opportunities that can be achieved through programmatic collaboration, rule-making, performance measurement.

- b. Provide technical expertise to Workforce Councils and regional lead organizations about reform processes so each plan’s legislative agenda is realistic and practical for local legislators to advance during the legislative session.
 - c. Leverage the unique role and position of senior leaders from the Dayton Administration to further educate and inspire stakeholders (state, regional/local across private and public sectors).
 3. Within the Department of Employment & Economic Development, make LMI “must have” knowledge.
 - a. Conduct a communications audit of LMI targeted to youth/parent demographic to determine audience penetration and engagement; evaluate for literacy levels, availability in languages other than English and formats other than print.
 - b. Create and implement a communications plan focused on Work-Based Learning messaging to student and parent audiences that includes measurable goals for enhanced exposure through social media, billboards.
 4. Private sector stakeholder outreach planning should reflect local needs and accomplishments:
 - a. Include WBL and LMI in dashboard talking points for commissioners of NGA Policy Academy departments and other engaged units of government and Lt. Governor Smith for use when they meet with businesses and industry groups.
 - b. Workforce Councils collaborate with local legislators to conduct outreach with local businesses (set achievable goals).
 - c. Identify and prioritize business/ industry associations that are essential connections to increasing private sector participation statewide (define participation, measure progress).
 - d. Provide user-friendly data in audience-based formats that makes the case for the urgency, benefits to participating companies and significance to regional economic vitality.

Summary

Within the NGA Policy Academy, local or regional lead organizations and WBL’s partner network, there is a sense of urgency and ownership of this complex issue. Conversations have led to a list of tangible actions that could contribute to measurable improvements, though there’s a realistic awareness that no one area (public, private or non-profit) can carry the load. Each provides renewed strength and opportunity for another’s progress. Focus, communication, leadership and accountability by all three sectors form the basis of the recommendations and the formula for success.

Call to Action

In evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the focus groups, participants were surveyed and provided a roster containing contact information of others who attended their session. Policy Academy members learned there is interest in the field to continue the work. Nearly all Focus Group participants indicated they learned a fair amount about WBL for 16-24 year olds and feel better positioned to build their networks.

Local champions self-identified their enthusiasm with building upon existing efforts and planning for new ones. Feedback about the use of time and focus of conversation was positive. State agency officials who participated felt they've an important first step in building trust and an open channel of communication with regional non-profit and public sector stakeholder/partners.

Through survey feedback, Focus Group participants indicated a strong interest in continuing this work. Thus, the recommendations presented in this report pertain to internal or programmatic efforts, training and an approach to changing popular thinking around technical and vocational training. Even at this early stage, the private sector's presence and input is essential. It will be important for WBL experts at all levels to be open-minded, manage expectations yet convey confidence about the path to measurable success, when the private sector comes to the table permanently.