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Anna V. Wilson

Chara H. Bohan
Georgia State University, cbohan@gsu.edu

Manuel Flores-Fahara

Cynthia S. Salinas
University of Texas at Austin, cssalinas@austin.utexas.edu

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FASCD Policy Review
c/o Judith J. Slater
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Studies
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EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK POLICY: LIFELONG LEARNERS OR LIFELONG WORKERS?

Anna V. Wilson, Chara Bohan, Roberta Dorow,
Manuel Floris-Fahara, and Cinthia Salinas

A consistent discourse emanating from the corporate community focuses on the theme that the United States desperately needs technicians, supervisors, and highly skilled frontline workers. Few would disagree the workplace is changing as are the requisite skills employees must possess. Not surprisingly, employers want workers with a broad set of workplace skills and a strong foundation in the basics that will enable them to learn on the job. However, the United States public education system's focus on preparing young students for college or university work seems to ignore the simple fact that fifty percent of the youth do not go on to postsecondary studies.¹

School-to-Work transition programs were developed to address the career needs of noncollege bound students. School-to-Work proponents contend that if the United States does not integrate the workplace effectively, the competitive edge of the United States will continue to decline. School-to-Work transition programs are clearly driven by the fear of a "nation at risk" losing its economic global power. A nation that was perfectly willing to create a subclass of low skill workers now finds it must prepare *all* students with a greater degree of skill and knowledge than ever before for the workplace. This article questions the fundamental assertions of the School-to-Work policy and argues that educators must take a proactive stance regarding School-to-Work and other policy issues which affect schools.

The School-to-Work Policy

Since the late 1800s an economic metaphor has pervaded the United States educational system. Throughout this period, economic principles have shaped American schools' curricula and instructional practices, as well as reform efforts. However, any economic metaphor which guides the nature and purpose of schooling shifts the discourse from the needs and interests of the child to the needs and interests of those in power.² In other words, should the primary purpose of the school be devoted to preparing students for the world of work?³ If so, students would then become life-long trainees, learning specific skills for specific

tasks, but would never become life-long learners, pursuing knowledge for its own sake. According to the economic argument, students go to school to get a good job and to make the nation more economically competitive.⁴

School-to-Work proponents believe that without an effective transition, students will not be adequately prepared for a changing information-based economy. The modern work place requires analysis of data, communication skills, rapid learners, team work and collaborative decision making.⁵ The proponents maintain that the mismatch between high school and workplace will only continue to grow as more and more jobs will require significant learning not found in high school curricula.⁶ In essence, America's ability to remain competitive in a changing global economy is endangered. Therefore, education policy makers set out to create an effective "School-to-Work Transition" that would solve the economic concerns shared by everyone.

The term "School-to-Work" suggests that peoples' lives are divided into distinct sections of education and training in preparation for the work world. School-to-Work transition is a process that young people go through when they leave school. According to experts, a School-to-Work system should incorporate work-based learning, including work experience, mentoring, and industry-specific skills. Secondly, school-based learning, incorporating high academic content and standards should be included. Finally, connecting activities, matching students with employers and post-secondary work opportunities, must be provided.⁷

A major assertion of the School-to-Work policy authors is that the noncollege-bound high school students are neglected and are ill prepared to make the transition from School-to-Work.⁸ The authors then assert that the purpose of school is to prepare students for the workplace. However, many educators believe the primary function of school is to prepare students to learn, to explore, to interact, to participate, to inquire, to discuss, to demonstrate and to explain. In the process of engaging in such endeavors, students can develop the ability to become excellent workers. Regardless, the responsibility for engagement rests with the students; the school can only be held accountable for providing opportunities.

Policy authors of the School-to-Work program make an interesting assertion that unless money is invested in vocational programs, students will not experience success upon completion of school, thereby costing society even more money for welfare and the criminal justice system.⁹ Minimal research supports the above referenced assertion. However, the statement clearly attempts to evoke support for the School-to-Work program based on fear

rather than knowledge.

Various solutions to the concerns addressed by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act are embedded in the underlying assumptions of the policies. In order to implement School-to-Work programs, systematic changes are needed in the current educational system.¹⁰ The purpose of education, the manner in which teachers are trained, the way in which students are educated, and the relationship between the school and the community may need to undergo dramatic changes. Not surprisingly, Goals 2000 have laid the foundation for School-to-Work programs. Therefore, School-to-Work programs are designed to decrease significantly the differences in achievement between learners who have disabilities, are disadvantaged, are ethnically and racially diverse, and who have limited English proficiency.¹¹ Policy authors assume that strong vocational education programs can ameliorate a variety of problems in education.

Prominent ideas for improving the School-to-Work system are the integration of the academic and occupational curricula, the linking of school with a structured work experience, and the creation of formal connections between secondary and post-secondary education. Each of these represents a formidable challenge. Some disagreement exists about whether School-to-Work programs should link high school to four-year colleges, or just two-year post-secondary institutions. Given the greater earnings for four-year-college graduates, School-to-Work programs risk being regarded as second-best unless they clearly keep the four-year college option open.¹²

One immediate implication is that the success of a School-to-Work program cannot be judged simply by attainment of a full-time job. Young people usually do not stay in their first full-time job. School-to-Work transition must therefore be seen as a process that occurs over a period of years. The process usually begins with part-time jobs during high school, includes work combined with post-secondary education immediately after high school, and may also involve periods of further schooling unless individuals leave school abruptly or forever. School-to-Work should mean that students are able to find and keep the kind of jobs they want, possibly with the aid of continued or intermittent schooling along the way. School-to-Work programs must also seek to ensure that students acquire the knowledge and skill necessary to change jobs and continue learning throughout their working lives.

Conclusion

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 mandated states create School-to-Work systems as part of educational reform and Goals 2000. Those opposed to School-to-Work programs argue that economic motivation drives the policy necessitating a careful analysis of both short and long-term consequences for students. Appropriate concerns exist about School-to-Work programs enhancing tracking of students, lowering of academic standards, and further disenfranchising minority and poor students. Many educators dispute the arguments supporting the School-to-Work program. These educators contend the assumptions underlying the policies are fallacious, thereby demanding intense investigation of the full policy and its potential ramifications.

Whether one supports the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 or not, a careful analysis of the Act itself is required. Perhaps of most importance to educators, however, is to actively engage in a dialogue with policy makers prior to imposing another 'educational reform package' on schools. Educators must take a proactive stance regarding policy issues which directly, or indirectly, affect schools. Playing with children's lives must not be taken lightly. If, as educators, we do nothing to question educational policies, then who will?

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2. For a detailed discussion see Bobbitt and Taylor.
3. In *Forging the American Curriculum*, Kliebard states, "The bureaucratic model, along with its behavioristic and technological refinements, threatens to destroy in the name of efficiency, the satisfaction that one may find in intellectual activity." (New York: Routledge, 1992), 130-131.

4. According to Postman, our society views America as an economy which was reflected in the 1983 document, *A Nation at Risk*, where ...you will find a definitive expression that education is an instrument of economic policy and very little else. N. Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 174.

5. Kazis, 4.

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ANNA V. WILSON, CHARA BOHAN, ROBERTA DOROW, MANUAL FLORIS-FAHARA, AND CINTHIA SALINAS ARE DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

HIGHER STANDARDS - WORLD CLASS COMPETITORS: IS THAT WHAT AMERICANS WANT OUR STUDENTS TO BE?

George E. Pawlas

Some say the nation's education system - from K-12 through the universities - has reached a turning point. Forces outside the system continue to press for changes. America's workplace demands more and different skills than ever before, skills not in the curricula of the typical public school. Florida along with many other states, is finding out its dated school system handicaps the entire society.

But how can these conditions exist when so many school reform initiatives have been part of most school districts' plans? Most notable of these initiatives, GOALS 2000 - the National School Improvement Initiative Program - continues to meet with mixed reviews and support. Although many people credit the Clinton Administration with the national initiative, its philosophical origin can be traced the 1989 education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. At that conference the nation's governors and President Bush agreed to draft national goals. Currently 47 states, including Florida, are involved with GOALS 2000. Florida's program, known as Blueprint 2000, reflects the intentions of the eight goals in the national program.

Not everyone feels GOALS 2000 is worth the money and efforts being expended. For example, Diane Ravitch, a senior researcher with the Washington-based Brookings Institution and a former Education Department official in the Bush Administration, says, "It's hard to evaluate. The law is new, at different stages among the states, and likely to undergo some modifications." She continued, "The best you can say about GOALS 2000 right now is that it has gotten a lot of people talking about standards and thinking about what standards are" (Pitsch, 1995).

Joan Beck, a *Chicago Tribune* columnist, shared her criticism of GOALS 2000 in a recent column. She insists GOALS 2000 was an "exceedingly clever political ploy" of its authors. She cites the recent report of the National Education Goals Panel, which reported math and science scores are up a little; more college students are majoring in science; more parents are reading to preschoolers; and schools seem slightly safer. On the other hand, twelfth-grade reading scores are worse. There is little or no progress in high