

Report on the June 1996 Maryland workplace education conference

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by

Paul Jurmo

Learning Partnerships

14 Griffin St.

East Brunswick, NJ 08816-4806

908/254-2237

Background

An electronic version of the following report was posted to the WEC listserv on July 10, 1996. In previous months, several messages had been posted to the list which dealt with the question of how state-level workforce development policy might support workplace basic education -- and vice versa.

On June 24 and 25, 1996, this was the topic for discussion in the state of Maryland. The Labor Education Achievement Program ("Project LEAP," a federally-funded workplace education project run by the Maryland State Dept. of Ed and the Metropolitan Baltimore Council of AFL-CIO Unions) hosted a two-day conference for adult educators, representatives of unions and employers, and public policy makers.

The following is a hard-copy version of the electronic summary of what happened on those two days

What happened on June 24 and 25, 1996

On the morning of June 24th, participants broke into small groups to discuss a dozen critical issues which those organizing workplace education efforts must deal with.

These issues included:

- Who benefits from workplace education/training: management, workers, the community, the labor movement?*
- Getting workers to come: what is needed?*
- What are the qualities of successful teachers in workplace education?*
- How do we accomodate workers with disabilities?*
- How do changes in affirmative action and gender equity impact workforce development?*
- How do we measure learner progress and workplace impact?*
- How can we recruit companies and labor to invest in workplace education? (e.g., how to serve industry "clusters," smaller companies and unions, companies and unions in enterprise zones, etc.)*
- How do non-native English speakers impact the workforce? What are the implications for workplace education?*
- New technology: how does it impact workforce development?*

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- *What makes a good union-based program?*
- *Public policy and the new block grants: how will they impact labor, management, and education?*
- *Career Net, O-Net, One-Stop Centers: how can they be used to impact workforce development?*

For each issue, participants clarified (a) who is impacted by this issue, (b) what needs to be in place to deal with it, and (c) actions which policy-makers should take to help the field deal with it. (After the small groups were completed, the findings from each group were summarized for presentation on the final day of the conference and for inclusion in a conference report.)

In the afternoon of June 24th, participants attended panels and workshops on the following topics: "best practices in health care programs," "best practices in industry," "alternative routes for high school credentials," "block grants and the future of workplace education," "customized curriculum," "computer-assisted instruction," "distance learning," and "training for technological change."

This writer participated in the panel on "block grants and the future of workplace education." Here are some highlights from that panel:

Deborah Araujo (AFL-CIO Human Resources Development Institute) made the following points about the issue of block grants:

- *Currently there is a great deal of anticipation around the country about the issue of block grants. But, generally, people are not very clear just what block grants are.*
- *Stated simply, under the current version of the "Workforce and Careers Development Act" now before Congress, the federal government would consolidate 114 programs under one large umbrella in each state. Along with that consolidation will likely come a decrease in funding.*
- *Organized labor might take this as an opportunity to get involved. Otherwise, labor might be hurt if the new system -- especially the "workfare" programs -- creates low-wage non-unionized jobs.*
- *Labor should promote mechanisms within each state's planning process, to ensure that there are (a) open hearings, (b) public review and comment, and (c) legislative oversight.*
- *Labor should also promote the following as elements of how workforce development programs are administered:*
 - *Elected officials and public agencies should be in charge of funding.*
 - *For-profits should not be in charge of administering programs.*

Audrey Theis (Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development) talked about issues facing those trying to create integrated workforce development systems,

including:

- How do suppliers of services find out what their customers need?*
- The average American somehow finds his/her way through the country's workforce system. But for those who are not so successful in doing so, the federal government has historically stepped in to provide help.*
- However, those federally-funded programs have tended to be organized in categories which inhibit providing the range of services customers need in a coordinated, integrated way.*
- The current push for a one-stop system is moving beyond "coordination" to "integration."*
- Historically, employers have not been involved in the workforce development efforts of public and non-profit agencies. In many cases, employers simply don't see much value in the work we do.*
- In economic development efforts, the incumbent worker has had the lowest priority. However, because the rate of change in workplaces is becoming more rapid, employers now are paying more attention to the question of whether their current employees are adequately prepared to keep up. This new awareness by employers is countered by their historical tendency not to think in terms of long-term planning and investment.*
- Larger companies have an infrastructure for human resource development, training, and education. Smaller companies (the majority of US firms) don't. Larger companies tend to limit their training to higher-level workers, even though this is counter to team-based management.*
- It's difficult for small companies to do good workplace needs assessments, although economic development specialists can help do such assessments of small companies and of industry clusters.*
- Many see workplace basic skills programs as stand-alone entities, something done prior to and apart from other training and organizational development initiatives. However, many companies do see basic education as something which can and should be contextualized and integrated with other organizational improvement efforts.*
- US companies tend to be reactive, responding to emergencies first.*
- Within the relatively small state of Maryland, there is a culture of collaboration among state-level policy makers.*
- Businesses and educators tend to analyze problems with different "units of analysis." Business people, for example, tend to focus on changing many components of the organization simultaneously. Educators have historically focused on individuals.*
- Educators should learn to think in terms of how they can help companies create user-friendly "systems" rather than simply creating "programs." Educators would thus see adult basic education as part of a larger "workforce development system."*

Other participants in this panel session made the following comments:

- If the 104th Congress doesn't pass the bill now before it, we might then revisit the workplace education issue and get agencies to re-do this legislation.*
- Businesses often don't want to collaborate, especially with others they see as competitors.*
- While Europeans build the cost of training into their budgets, US companies generally don't.*
- We need to identify areas of workforce need and then target them for services.*
- Governors' flex funds might be accessed via a voucher system.*
- There is little communication among the various stakeholders in the current workforce system.*
- Maryland is now developing skills standards for nine job categories.*
- Community colleges in the state are now developing databases to identify possible providers in their communities.*
- Industries are now relocating into particular geographical areas to attract particular types of workers. Educators can then develop services related to the particular economic needs of those companies and workforces.*
- Businesses typically encounter several government agencies offering essentially the same kinds of services. Employers get tired of government people knocking on their doors offering to "help" them, even though those "helpers" have often never had to operate their own businesses before. There is a lot of waste and duplication and irrelevant services.*
- Whatever workforce development efforts are planned in a state should be planned via a collaboration of all stakeholders.*

On the morning of June 25th, spokespersons for the dozen critical issue groups which had met on the previous morning reported on their respective groups' findings, as follows:

The "assessment" group recommended that policy makers . . .

- . . . Provide funding for assessment and evaluation.*
- . . . Promote effective assessment as central to program design.*
- . . . Respect the confidentiality of those involved.*
- . . . Recognize the long-term nature of workplace education outcomes.*
- . . . Reward those who run good programs.*
- . . . Provide technical assistance related to assessment and evaluation.*
- . . . Create appropriate measures for workplace development.*
- . . . Use the results of evaluations.*
- . . . View evaluation as an ongoing, positive tool*

The "enterprise and empowerment zone" group said . . .

- . . . Enterprise zones have generally not worked very well.*

The "block grant" group said . . .

. . . No one knows what block grants and categorial grants are. The field needs to have a seminar which explains these terms.

. . . The field needs to be clear about who will be involved in making decisions in the new system.

. . . There is a fear that, with block grants, decision-making will be politicized at the state level along turf lines.

. . . There should be a focus on outcomes via a good feedback loop.

The "who benefits from workplace education" group said . . .

. . . There are potential conflicts inherent in the relationships between the stakeholders involved in workforce development efforts. There thus is a need to build trust among those stakeholders, showing them that they "will be taking a journey together."

. . . We need to clarify how to get stakeholders "to demand education, not just endure it."

The "disabilities" group said . . .

. . . Policy needs to remove barriers to participation which the disabled face.

. . . Policy need to be based on an understanding of the nature of disabilities, of what

the disabled can do, and of what is needed to help the disabled succeed.

. . . The new Internet systems being developed at the state level are one way of breaking down barriers which the disabled have faced.

The "characteristics of effective workplace educators" group said . . .

. . . Instructors need to be "non-partisan," not taking sides in disputes among other stakeholders represented in the workplace.

The "union" group said . . .

. . . Unions and management need to set aside adversarial positions and focus on the neutral goal of creating a well-equipped workforce.

In response to the above presentations, the following points were raised:

-- Those developing the new Internet data-base and referral systems need to be careful not to simply be referring clients to programs which are underequipped to deal with them. (One way of avoiding this is to have workplace educators be involved in the planning of those electronic referral systems.)

-- While it is important to be emphasizing accountability and evaluation of program outcomes, we need to create assessment criteria and procedures which are relevant to the goals which programs are focusing on. Otherwise evaluations and programs are not in sync, and evaluations can end up producing irrelevant information and/or programs can end up "teaching to the assessment" rather than to authentic workforce needs.

-- This discussion demonstrates a number of potential markets for workplace

- educators: small businesses and unions, clusters of industries, enterprise zones, the disabled, underserved worker populations, ESOL populations, and companies and unions which are highly-motivated and already committed to lifelong learning.
- Workplace educators need to be thinking "longer-term" and, for example, helping to create a pool of qualified professionals by reaching out to college students, human resource development specialists, union educators, and other potential sources of "sympatico" instructors.
 - We need to be focusing on the local or regional levels, because that is "where the action will be." However, guidelines must be provided to local-level adult educators, to help them know what they are supposed to do if they do, for example, get included in a local workforce development board.
 - Workplace educators who have been relying on public funding must now be focusing on how to get employers and unions to institutionalize the kinds of services we have been developing.
 - Adult educators need to demonstrate how GED attainment impacts on state competitiveness.
 - Workplace educators need to get information about models being developed in other states.
 - Workplace educators also should be informed about what is going on at the federal level and then actively promote good federal policy.
 - We should recognize that policy recommendations we develop today will be outdated a few months down the line. We thus should continually produce new ideas and recommendations in response to changing conditions.
 - We need to recognize that we are operating in a constantly-changing environment characterized by professional insecurity.

In a lunch-time panel on June 25th, speakers made the following points:

Peter Joyce (National Alliance of Business) said . . .

- . . . In his work with business-education partnerships, he hears rhetoric from politicians and looks at innovations being developed by business and education. In all this discussion, "change" is a common theme.
- . . . That change comes in three areas: (a) competition, (b) technology and increased information, and (c) how workplaces are organized.
- . . . The "half-life" of occupations is now 3-4 years. This means that we need to be training people for jobs which don't yet exist.
- . . . In one example of the impact of technology on jobs: An ATM machine can handle 10 times as many transactions as a bank teller per day.
- . . . The move which the American workforce made from an agrarian to an industrial mode was relatively less complicated than the transition which American workers are now being asked to make. To deal with these changes, we need broader and more-complex SCANS-type skills while also needing strong, "traditional" 3Rs-type skills.
- . . . Schools tend to be made a scapegoat for the apparent unpreparedness of US workers. However, this tendency to blame the schools overlooks the facts that (a)

schools are serving more people than ever before, (b) schools are providing higher-level instruction than they did in the 1960s, (c) in many cases standardized tests are more demanding than they were in the 1960s and US students are performing better on those tests, and (d) the demand for higher-level skills is increasing. Thus, even though schools are actually "doing better" in many respects, the demands being placed on them are outpacing the improvements which have been made.

. . . US workplaces are changing in many ways, including:

-- Positions are being downsized.

-- 43 million jobs were eliminated between 1979 and 1995 (i.e., approximately 3% of jobs are eliminated per year). However, 70 million new jobs were created in the same period, representing a net gain of 27 million jobs.

. . . For workers, this means that knowledge and skill are vital to maintain higher wages.

. . . For our field, these changes mean that . . .

-- Basic skills remain vital, but broad skills to ensure workforce flexibility and readiness are also needed. (We need to avoid training people for narrow, inflexible occupations.)

-- Top-heavy bureaucratic institutions are not the wave of the future. Leaner and more flexible partnerships are vital.)

James Callahan (Maryland Governor's Workforce Investment Board) said that the Board is to serve as a team which identifies solutions for workplace development needs while ensuring accountability for the workforce develop system via long-term benchmarking.

Larry Fink (representing the state AFL-CIO) said . . .

. . . In his work with a joint labor-management apprenticeship training program, he is finding that the number of qualified applicants is decreasing for well-paid jobs.

. . . On average, his applicants (a) are 24 years old, (b) are high school grads, (c) have little previous on-the-job training, (d) are newly-displaced, and (e) have limited basic skills.

. . . He is looking for applicants who have received a high school diploma and have "skills for success" (i.e., Maryland's version of SCANS-type skills).

. . . Increasingly, we are operating in a labor market characterized by a disparity between the rich and poor. Our field, however, can make the American Dream happen for a lot of people. We need to pass the word on to anyone who will take the time to listen to us.

Sondra Stein (National Institute for Literacy) said . . .

. . . When she worked in Massachusetts, companies often wanted tax breaks as an incentive to invest in workforce development. States are now using such tax breaks as a tool to compete against each other. But this reliance on tax breaks has the potential negative effective of creating lowered tax bases and therefore a diminished pool of resources for our field to do what we need to do.

... The National Institute would like to see states put together effective, integrated systems of workforce development.

... NIFL has three projects in various stages which can support the creation of such systems:

1. NIFL will launch a new public-awareness campaign with the National Coalition for Literacy. This will focus on literacy as a foundation for solving problems we face today. The campaign will have three targets: the general public, public policy makers, and business leaders.

2. NIFL also has the LINCS electronic information system which anyone can get access to to share information and learn what others are doing.

3. NIFL is developing a results-based accountability system through (a) development of a system for measuring performance, recording information, and accountability in a number of states (via a project with the National Governors Assn.); (b) clarifying what adult learners need to know to perform various life roles (Dealing with "change" was a common need, whether the role was as citizen, worker, or family member.) This will lead to more-appropriate assessment and instructional tools.

Herbert Moore (of the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development) said . . .

... His agency provides three types of services:

-- Marketing (to attract new companies to the state and keep current ones in the state);

-- Financing (to issue block grant loans);

-- Regional development (to work with existing companies to create better-coordinated workforce development systems).

... His agency is trying to get companies to work together to do customized training, with companies paying 50% of costs.

... His agency's staff are divided into regional offices which reach out to identify locally-available workforce development resources. For example, in one area his agency is working with a number of providers to provide relevant services to a new Staples warehouse.

Project LEAP representative Laura Chenven concluded the conference by stating:

-- This conference represents a watershed in the field of workplace education and development. New collaborations and networks have been formed. Twelve critical issues have been discussed. Findings from the two days will be disseminated quickly, with names, addresses, and e-mail addresses.

-- The NIFL-funded study of what is going on in other states will also be disseminated.

-- Participants moved beyond traditional, rigid divisions between education and training. In the process, traditional "turf" barriers were broken down.

-- One recurring theme in the two days was the ongoing need for effective partnerships.

State ABE Director Charles Talbert added:

-- In the mid-1980s, the state got its workplace basic education initiative underway through a similar conference which featured Business Council for Effective Literacy president (and McGraw-Hill CEO), Harold McGraw, Jr.

-- This conference will lead to an action plan which will guide additional work.

-- A key to the success of this conference was "We got the right folks in the right room. This includes new faces, not just the usual faces."

For further information about this conference (and a copy of the conference report), contact Cathy Hampton (410/767-0516) and Laura Chenven (410/767-0631) at Project LEAP, Maryland State Dept. of Ed., 200 W. Baltimore St., Baltimore, MD 21201.