

A man in a dark pinstriped suit and tie is shown from the chest up, talking on a mobile phone. He has a serious expression and is looking down. The background is a blurred office hallway.

**Tomorrow's Workforce: Ready or Not
It's a Choice the Business Community Must Make Now**



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Businesses throughout the United States are facing a crisis. Young people today—the workforce of tomorrow—are not prepared to contribute to or succeed in a knowledge-based economy. This crisis is one that threatens our nation's ability to compete in a rapidly changing and more competitive global economy. And if left unresolved, it is a crisis that will undercut the standard of living and way of life for our children—and theirs. But it is also a problem with solutions, if we can harness the skills, resources and vision of all the stakeholders—parents, business leaders, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and young people themselves.

This statement of principles, prepared by Corporate Voices for Working Families, spotlights the challenges facing the business community—and highlights actions that can be taken now to help solve a problem that involves not just our young people, but one that touches the lives of everyone.

Introduction

U.S. companies are competing in an ever-increasing global marketplace where workers must transition from an industrial- to a knowledge-based economy. But just as employers need decades of institutional knowledge to meet the challenges of the global business environment, the baby boom generation—the most experienced workers with the greatest knowledge and skills—is beginning to retire. The U.S. economy depends upon a strong pool of new entrants to the workforce who will continue the American traditions of innovation, research and development. The business community recognizes that in order to improve workforce readiness and ensure a rich and diverse talent pool, young people need learning opportunities where they can develop the full range of skills they will need to be successful in school, work and life.

In the coming decade, young people ages 14 to 21 will be the new entrants to the U.S. workplace. They will fill the jobs left open by the retiring baby boomers. But according to our recent survey, **Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce**, more than 40 percent of high school graduates lack the skills they need to make a successful transition to the workplace of the 21st century.¹ In the survey, employers report that new entrants need not only strong basic

1. Consortium. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Washington, DC: The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and The Society for Human Resource Management. 2006, p. 31.

In addition to ensuring that young people have the workforce skills they need to succeed, business leaders are paying close attention to the particular needs and strengths of the next demographic bubble of new workers, known as the millennials or Gen Y, who are just starting to enter the workforce en masse. For example, this is a generation that is used to being connected, in human terms as well as technologically. That means they respond best to a manager who connects with them regularly and who provides positive and constructive feedback. At the same time, their comfort with technology and ability to multitask presents business with an opportunity to find new ways to increase productivity and innovation. Leading companies are exploring and implementing a host of new strategies to integrate Gen Y into the workplace.²

academic skills such as reading, writing and math. But they also require several equally important applied skills including professionalism, oral and written communication, teamwork and critical thinking.

Given the significant and ongoing changes in the economy, and the accompanying demands in the workplace, keeping America competitive will require changes in the way young people are educated. To remain globally competitive, employers need a talent pipeline that is filled with young people who have a broad range of skills, including many applied skills that may be more easily developed beyond the traditional education system. Improving the workforce readiness of young people is a growing priority within the business community. As such, business must play a leadership role in articulating the necessary change and working toward such change.

The business community has already begun this process by defining workforce readiness skills to include not only basic academic skills, but also critical applied workplace skills. Business can lead the change by acknowledging that the existing tangle of fragmented efforts for youth must be transformed into a seamless web of engaging learning opportunities and developmental supports.

Achieving this will require:

- State-of-the-art corporate accountability and coordination practices to hold communities responsible for putting in place the type of high-quality, integrated system of services, supports and opportunities young people need to thrive.
- Greater collaboration among all entities, including business, to work together to ensure that young people have the range of opportunities they need to develop the skills necessary to succeed in school, work and life.
- Business to drive change by focusing its philanthropic investment in systems and strategies that advance a more holistic, integrated and coordinated approach to preparing young people for success in school, in the workplace and in life.

2. Smith, Stan, *Decoding Generational Differences, Fact, Fiction, or Should we just get Back to Work?* Deloitte. 2008.

The Business Case for an Integrated Youth Development and Learning System

“Our nation’s long-term ability to succeed in exporting to the growing global marketplace hinges on the abilities of today’s students.”

J. Willard Marriott, Jr., Chairman and CEO, Marriott International, Inc.

“Now more than ever, the success of public and private organizations in the United States . . . depends on the knowledge and capabilities of their employees.”

American Society for Training and Development³

It is a truism in corporate America that having a high-quality workforce is the backbone of any company. Business leaders from across all sectors, all regions and from companies large and small agree that an educated, skilled workforce is a business imperative.

The coming demographic crunch, caused by retiring baby boomers and lower birth rates, combined with a talent crunch, causes concern throughout the business community.⁴ Leaders in the business community are alarmed that there are not enough young new entrants to the workforce—that we are literally running out of people. On top of that, today there is growing concern that the young people who are entering the workforce are underprepared, and that without substantial changes to grow a ready workforce, U.S. businesses will become less competitive and the overall economy will suffer.

Each year The Conference Board surveys CEOs about their top concerns. In 2007, The Conference Board reports that workforce challenges have risen in importance. In particular, “finding a qualified skilled workforce” jumped ahead 11 positions, the most of any challenge on the survey, and “finding qualified managerial talent” moved up seven ranks.

Source: CEO Challenge 2007, The Top 10 Challenges, The Conference Board, 2007.

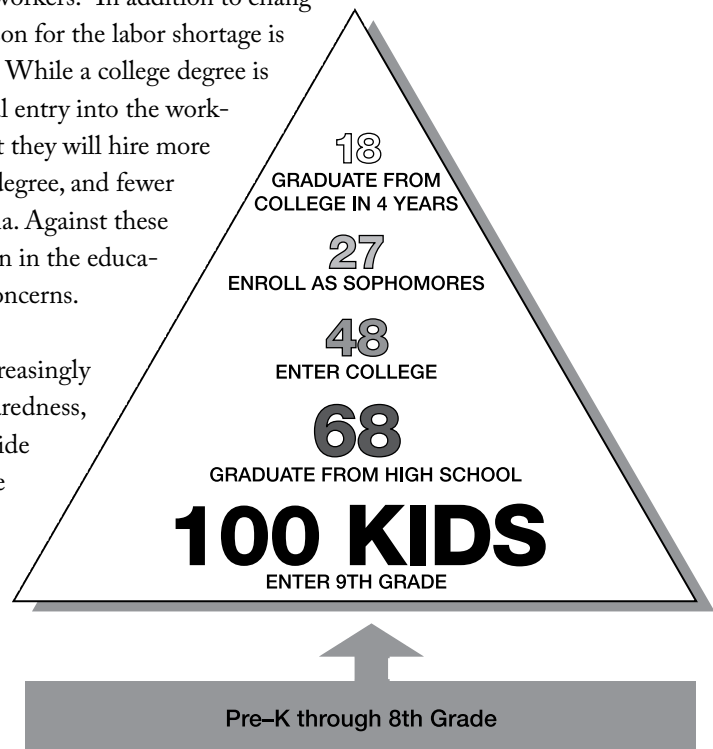
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3. *The Human Capital Challenge*, American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), 2003. <http://www.astd.org/NR/rdonlyres/94B67899-27AD-4826-9B8C-EA3A2D486E66/12999/HCWPcolor.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2008.
 4. Manpower Inc. *Confronting the Talent Crunch—White Paper*, 2007. http://manpowerblogs.com/holmes/files/hardest_jobs.pdf, accessed March 25, 2008.

Workforce Shortages and the Need for Entry Level Talent

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that, between 2010 and 2025, up to 95 million baby boomers will leave the U.S. workforce, but only 40 million members of Generations X and Y will be available to replace retiring workers.⁵ In addition to changing demographics, another reason for the labor shortage is that the talent pipeline is leaky. While a college degree is not a requirement for successful entry into the workforce, employers do project that they will hire more new employees with a college degree, and fewer with only a high school diploma. Against these projections, the data on attrition in the education system raises significant concerns.

Because a college degree is increasingly being used as a proxy for preparedness, these dwindling numbers provide insight into why companies are concerned about the number of available and skilled new entrants.⁶

According to experts on youth development, there is no developmental reason that high school students cannot master the requisite workplace skills, including use of technology, creativity and innovation. As a country, we are shortchanging our young people, and our economy, by failing to create adequate opportunities for all young people to develop these necessary skills. This is a critical challenge. It is



also an opportunity for educators, community leaders, and business leaders to work together to ensure that the high school years include adequate learning opportunities for young people to master these knowledge economy skills so that they can successfully enter either the workplace or go on to higher education.

It should be noted, however, that those young people who successfully enter the workplace directly from high school will typically need additional education (formal education or on-the-job training) for career advancement.

Employers point to a number of reasons for their growing preference for new entrants with college education. Many indicate that they are looking for a college degree because a high school diploma is no longer a guarantee that the graduate will have key workplace skills. And, as our Ready to Work research demonstrates, increased education does translate to increased skill mastery. Employers also point to the transition to a knowledge economy as a driver for requiring increased education. Further analysis suggests, however, that employers use of “knowledge economy” language generally refers to technology skills, and, sometimes, creativity and innovation skills.

5. U.S. Department of Labor.

6. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Policy Alert*, 2004.

The Entry Level Skills Gap and Its Cost

Another area of concern focuses on the skill level of new entrants, regardless of level of educational attainment. Corporate Voices' recent workforce readiness survey confirms that employers are already experiencing a significant skills gap among new entrants (those coming out of high school and two-year and four-year colleges).⁷ In *Bridging the Skills Gap*, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) identifies several factors behind today's skills gap including:

- **Jobs are changing:** Changes including global competition, the transition to a knowledge economy, and the use of technology mean that there is an increased demand for highly skilled workers.
- **Educational attainment is lagging the need for skills:** Educational attainment is increasing more slowly than it has in past decades.
- **Workforce growth is slowing:** Smaller numbers of new workers will enter the workforce in the current decade than in the past decade. This coincides in the United States with the impending retirement of the baby boomer generation.⁸

For business, the financial costs of the skills gap are substantial. The costs include recruitment costs, training costs and turnover costs. In addition, while more difficult to calculate, the cost of lost innovation and productivity is also substantial.

In considering the costs of the skills gap, it is particularly important to understand the investment that the corporate sector makes in the area of training because it is this figure that is linked most directly to the preparedness, or lack thereof, of new entrants to the workplace. ASTD estimates that the corporate sector spends \$109.25 billion per year, or 8.26 percent of 2006 GDP on training.⁹

Most employers provide substantial training to new employees, including technology training, training on the specific job duties and corporate culture, and, too often, basic workforce readiness training. The \$109.25 billion per year represents all types of training combined. A figure that is not known is the particular amount that employers spend on *basic workforce readiness training*—training designed to make up for the deficiencies that new entrants bring to the workplace.

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7. Consortium. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Washington, DC: The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and The Society for Human Resource Management. 2006.
 8. American Society for Training and Development. *Bridging the Skills Gap: How Skills Shortage Threatens Growth and Competitiveness... and What to do About It* 2006. <http://www.astd.org/NR/rdonlyres/94B67899-27AD-4826-9B8C-EA3A2D486E66/12998/SkillsGapWhitePaper.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2008.
 9. American Society for Training and Development. ASTD International Conference and Exposition, June 5, 2007. <http://astd2007.astd.org/PDFs/Handouts%20for%20Web/Handouts%20Secured%20for%20Web%205-17%20thru%205-22/TU204.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2008.

Corporate Voices for Working Families believes that identifying the overall corporate investment in this training is important because it represents a dollar amount that, if understood, might be redirected to more effective strategies for ensuring that young people arrive at the workplace with at least adequate levels of proficiency in the important workplace skills. In an effort to better understand the corporate investment in readiness training, Corporate Voices has partnered with the American Society for Training and Development, The Conference Board and the Society for Human Resources Management on a research project focused on capturing that data and calculating an overall investment figure.

In addition to the direct costs to business, for society as a whole the economic costs of low educational achievement are also significant. Deficits in basic skills cost businesses, colleges and under prepared graduates as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs.¹⁰ The income difference between high school dropouts and those who receive diplomas or degrees means \$50 billion a year less is collected in state and federal taxes; dropouts account for \$30 billion a year less in Social Security contributions; and economists calculate that billions of dollars would be saved

annually in lower crime and health care expenses by increasing the level of education by even just one year.¹¹

It is these costs—both the direct costs to the business bottom line as well as the overall costs to society—that propel business to invest in the education and development of young people. In

The combined income and tax losses from a **single year's dropouts** is about \$192 billion—1.6 percent of the gross domestic product.¹²

fact, education is the number one social issue that U.S. businesses support, investing more than \$4.5 billion on all levels of education in 2004–2005.¹³ In addition, in recent years, the business community has devoted considerable energy to reforming the education system, through its support of various efforts at

both the state and national level. Despite all of these efforts, there have been only marginal gains and fully one-third of high school students drop out of high school before graduation.

10. U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Business and Education Network, Annual Report 2006. <http://www.uschamber.com/NR/rdonlyres/eu2eouw4kkafjaa6b2h4en2uh2hptjbipqs6kjyxn44byaxcdaa6cvk2ex5vm5akdob3pdoemv5danttd25nnemfch/BENcasestudy.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2008.

11. Time, Learning, Afterschool Task Force. *A New Day for Learning*, January 2007. <http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/ANewDayforLearning.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2008.

12. Bill Milliken, 2007. *The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic!*

13. U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Business and Education Network, Annual Report 2006.

The Imperative Need for More Business Involvement

Given the high cost to business, to society, and to young people themselves, it is time for the business community to redouble its efforts by calling for change and providing leadership to help transform the education system into one that is integrated, seamless, and provides young people a full range of learning experiences. Such efforts are a necessary and important investment in the future of individual businesses and the American economy.

In the following sections of this paper, we take a brief look at the current state of youth in America, strategies to better address the academic and developmental needs of young people, and the role of business in driving such change.

Current Context: How Youth Are Doing

As a society we are not adequately preparing young people to make successful transitions to either higher education or work. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 42 million Americans between 15 and 24 years old. However, rigorous data analyses conducted in selected communities show that only four out of 10 young people are doing well by the time they reach adulthood—working or attending college, in good health, and active in their communities.¹⁴ This same research suggests that by investing in young people and providing them with a range of basic supports, the odds for youth can be improved so that seven in 10, rather than the current four in 10, are doing well as they reach adulthood.

In the educational sphere, despite substantial efforts, the high school dropout rate remains alarming high. High school graduation rates are particularly alarming for African American, Hispanic and Native American young people, with only 50 percent of 9th graders graduating on time.¹⁵ Making successful transitions to secondary education and/or work is challenging for many young people: 40 percent of public high school graduates say they are unprepared for college or work.¹⁶

14. *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. (M. Gambone, A. Klem, J. Connell); *Some Things Do Make a Difference and We Can Prove It: Key Take-Aways from Finding Out What Matters for Youth*. (The Forum for Youth Investment).

15. Forum for Youth Investment, Ready for College Report. April 1, 2006. <http://forumforyouthinvestment.org/files/ReadyforCollege.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2008.

16. *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies conducted for Achieve, Inc.).

And for those who do go on to college, the already low on-time college graduation rate of 18 percent drops to a mere 6 percent for low-income students.

In terms of overall behaviors, it is clear that far too many young people are struggling.

- 60 percent do not participate in regular leisure-time physical activity.¹⁵
- 58 percent did not vote in the presidential election year.¹⁶
- 27 percent of young adults in their mid-twenties reported being current smokers¹⁷
- 17 percent of young adults were obese¹⁸
- 14 percent of young adults in their mid-twenties report having used marijuana or other illicit drugs in the previous month¹⁹
- 9 percent of young adults in their mid-twenties reported regular binge drinking²⁰

From a workforce readiness perspective, these statistics are alarming. To gain a better understanding of employers' perspectives on the specific issue of readiness of young people to enter the U.S. workforce, Corporate Voices worked with The Conference Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resources Management to gain an in-depth understanding of employers' views on the topic.

If excellence is necessary for America to continue to effectively compete in the global economy, then there is much work to be done in preparing the next generation of professionals to enter the workplace. Here's why:

- Less than one-quarter of employers, 23.9 percent, report that new entrants with four-year college degrees have "excellent" basic knowledge and applied skills, and important deficiencies exist among entrants at every level.²⁴

17. *Id.*

18. *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development.* (M. Gambone, A. Klem, J. Connell); *Some Things Do Make a Difference and We Can Prove It: Key Take-Aways from Finding Out What Matters for Youth.* (The Forum for Youth Investment).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. Child Trends, Brett Brown, K. Moore, S. Bzostek. *A Statistical Portrait of Well-being in Early Adulthood* Issue 2, August 2004. <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/PDF/Young%20Adults%20Brief.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2008.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?*, p. 31. (Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies conducted for Achieve, Inc.).

- The deficiencies are greatest at the high school level, with 42.4 percent of employers reporting the overall preparation of high school graduates as deficient.²⁵
- Teen employment is the lowest it has been in 57 years and unemployment rates are particularly high for low-income African American and Hispanic high school graduates.²⁶

New Entrants Need Basic *and* Applied Skills

In addition to assessing the overall preparation of young people, employers were asked about which skills mattered for success in the workplace. Employers report that new entrants to the workforce need not only the basic skills, reading, writing and math, but that in the 21st century business world, possessing a range of applied skills directly related to the workplace is critical to success. When asked to rank skills in terms of their importance in the workplace, employers put **professionalism, teamwork, communication and critical thinking at the top of the list**. This data indicate that employers expect new employees to have not only strong academic skills, but also a set of skills that depends on strong social, emotional and cognitive development.

Viewed through each of the above lenses, overall well being, educational achievement and workforce readiness, it is evident that substantial numbers of young people are not getting adequate learning opportunities and necessary support to develop the full range of skills they need to succeed in school, work and life. As a result, the incoming workforce is not adequately prepared to fill the jobs being created as the baby boomers begin to retire.

The good news is that much is known about what it takes to improve the odds for young people. Increasing the quality and quantity of opportunities for learning and skill development is critical. Having all stakeholders—parents, educators, community leaders, business leaders and policy-makers—work together to ensure that young people develop critical workplace skills is critical. The following section describes several important strategies to bring the business community together with other stakeholders to ensure that young people are prepared to succeed in school, work and life.

A New Day for Learning and the Ready by 21 Challenge

The quality of education—and education reform—have been on the business agenda for more than a decade because the workforce readiness of young people is vital to our economy. Many previous business efforts have focused on improvements inside the education system and/or increasing the links between schools and business. There is growing consensus, however, that the focus on school improvement and on academic achievement has begun to narrow.

25. *Id.*

26. Forum for Youth Investment, Ready for College Report. April 1, 2006. <http://forumforyouthinvestment.org/files/ReadyforCollege.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2008.

With some of the most important workplace skills in the applied areas—professionalism, communication, teamwork and critical thinking—we need a system that supports social, emotional and cognitive development in an integrated and systemic way. Research and practice suggest that improving workforce readiness will require changing what happens during the school day and inside the school building. Equally important, it will require a more comprehensive look at the full range of places where young people spend their time. For example, youth development organizations and afterschool programs are critical delivery systems for many of the applied skills that employers value most. In order to meet the growing demands and ensure that today's youth are well-prepared to enter the workplace of the 21st century, we need a new system for learning that coordinates and integrates these and other learning environments together with school-based learning.

“A New Day for Learning” highlights this new approach—the development of a comprehensive and seamless system of learning opportunities that values the distinct experience that families, schools, afterschool and youth development programs and communities provide for children and youth.²⁷ It is a system that strives to maximize and integrate learning experiences, rather than perpetuate the current pattern of isolation and fragmentation. It values multiple ways of learning and teaching, in multiple and varied environments, so that each child has an opportunity to maximize his or her potential to be a successful lifelong learner.

Transforming the education system so that young people have the full range of supports and opportunities they need to make successful transitions from secondary school into the workplace and/or higher education will require substantial changes. It will, as the Forum for Youth Development suggests, require leaders in all sectors to “change the way they do business.”

In order to help drive these changes, the Forum for Youth Investment has issued the Ready by 21™ Challenge, which calls on states and communities to change the odds for children and youth by changing the way they do business. Corporate Voices has joined the Forum's Ready by 21 Partnership, along with educators, through the American Association of School Administrators, community leaders, through the United Way of America and America's Promise, and policymakers, through the National Conference of State Legislators. This partnership will help bring all stakeholders together to work at the national and state and local level towards their shared goal of building a coordinated and integrated system that ensures that young people are ready for college, work and life.

27. Time, Learning, Afterschool Task Force. *A New Day for Learning*, January 2007. <http://www.edutopia.org/pdfs/ANewDayforLearning.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2008

Role of Business

Corporate America has valuable expertise to assist educators and communities working to ensure that young people develop necessary workplace skills. The type of integrated learning system which is needed is complex. It must be multifaceted (reaching young people in all the settings in which they live, learn, work and play), coordinated (aligning efforts by a large number of organizations), and accountable (maintaining high quality standards). Corporate know-how and leadership in the development of rigorous, complex systems can help communities look for partners outside of the formal education arena that can be brought together to increase training and support options for all young people.

Business can play a crucial leadership role working toward a new education system that is expansive, increasing what young people learn, as well as where, how, when and with whom they learn. Business can do this in a number of ways:

- By articulating the skills young people need to succeed.
- By working across sectors to provide opportunities for young people to develop the skills.
- By encouraging policymakers to create a new system that supports such development.
- By increasing the coordination of efforts throughout the business community.

Perhaps most importantly, business is uniquely situated to provide real work experiences to young people. Many employers, as well as researchers, agree that early work experience is one of the best predictors of success in the workplace.

The business community is increasingly aware that the formal education system, given existing structural limitations, is unlikely to succeed at preparing young people to enter the workforce. As a result, employers are broadening their commitment by supporting a wide range of initiatives, both internally in their companies and in partnership with community-based organizations, to expand learning opportunities for young people.

Business has a crucial role to play in providing early work experiences that help young people become ready for the workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that “enhancing employment experiences during the teen years may play an important role in the long-term reduction of welfare roles by providing at-risk youth with skills and experience that can be translated into later labor force successes.”²⁸

28. “The Relationship of Youth Employment to Future Educational Attainment and Labor Market Experience.” Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000. Available online at www.bls.gov/opub/rylf/rylfhome.htm.

Promising Business Practices: Supporting the Talent Pipeline

In *Business Leadership: Supporting Youth Development and the Talent Pipeline*, we identify a series of model practices that businesses are using to improve youth development and workforce readiness. Examples include the following:

- Businesses partnering with schools and other organizations that work with young people in order to provide internships, job shadowing programs and summer jobs.
- Businesses encouraging their employees to serve as mentors and tutors.
- Businesses investing in after school and youth development programs at the local, state and national level that have demonstrated their ability to improve outcomes for young people.

Business leaders also can use their expertise in innovation and management to help identify new and creative solutions that will invariably arise in the creation of a new, integrated system. Finally, business can provide leadership in its work with policymakers, whether as participants in state children's commissions, or in their work with policy makers at the local, state and national level.

Conclusion

As a companion to this white paper, Corporate Voices has released a set of principles that are designed to be used as a guide in creating a new system, or systems, for preparing young people to make successful transitions to work in the 21st century. We urge all stakeholders to use these principles as they move forward in this important work. The principles also contain a call to action for business, identifying several important strategies for business to pursue.

Corporate Voices for Working Families knows that different approaches must be taken now to prepare our nation's young people—our next generation of workers and citizens—to be successful on the job and throughout life. And to achieve results, we must create an integrated system of learning and development that incorporates a new examination of the following: young people, settings for learning, professional competencies and compensation, relevant accountability measures, aligned goals across sectors, better cross-sector partnerships, and an infrastructure to coordinate actions to achieve a quality workforce for the 21st century.

Foundation Partners

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
The Ford Foundation
The Hitachi Foundation

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Philip Morris USA Youth Smoking
Prevention

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