



# Wisconsin State Assembly

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TO: SPEAKER ROBIN VOS

FROM: Representative Bob Kulp, Chair, Speaker's Task Force on Youth Workforce Readiness

RE: Final Report of the Speaker's Task Force on Youth Workforce Readiness

DATE: August 30, 2016

This report provides an overview of the work of the Speaker's Task Force on Youth Workforce Readiness, including testimony and ideas provided over the course of five meetings of the task force. It then presents the chair's recommendations for potential options for legislative action.

## **MEETINGS OF THE SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON YOUTH WORKFORCE READINESS**

You created the Task Force on Youth Workforce Readiness to explore new ways to encourage Wisconsin youth to pursue careers in the trades, manufacturing industry, and technical fields. The task force held five public hearings throughout the state during the 2015 Legislative Session, on the following dates and at the following locations:

- September 10, 2015, Madison. The task force heard testimony from various speakers at the State Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin.
- September 29, 2015, Wausau. The task force heard testimony from various speakers at Northcentral Technical College in Wausau, Wisconsin.
- November 6, 2015, Green Bay. The task force heard from various speakers at the Green Bay Campus of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and toured the technical college.
- January 28, 2016, Oak Creek. The task force heard testimony from various speakers at the Oak Creek Campus of the Milwaukee Area Technical College and toured the College's Center for Energy Conservation and Advanced Manufacturing.
- March 29, 2016, Strum. The task force heard testimony from various speakers at the Eleva-Strum High School in Strum, Wisconsin and toured Cardinal Manufacturing.

## **THEMES FROM TESTIMONY BEFORE THE TASK FORCE**

During its five public hearings, the task force heard testimony from a wide range of stakeholders and experts including state agencies, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions, representatives of chambers of commerce, industry representatives, and business leaders. The task force heard and discussed a wide range of topics relating to youth workforce readiness. Below is a non-exhaustive summary of key themes arising from the public hearings held by the task force.

### **Importance of Student Participation in Technical Education and Training**

Numerous stakeholders emphasized the need to encourage greater participation in career and technical education, youth apprenticeship programs, and other programs relating to youth workforce readiness. The task force heard testimony about (and toured) numerous successful programs throughout the state. For example, the task force heard positive testimony from multiple speakers, including businesses and industry groups, about technical college programs. The task force also learned about several high school technical education programs that have become models for other schools by cultivating support from businesses and developing curricula to prepare students for modern technical careers.

Despite the many good programs, multiple speakers testified that low participation occurs in part because technical education and careers often suffer from a “perception issue.” Speakers mentioned that students, parents, high school counselors, and other groups sometimes perceive technical careers as a lesser choice compared with enrollment in a four-year university, despite high job prospects and earning potential in many technical fields. Speakers testified that the perception problem was especially present in high schools with outdated technical education curricula. Speakers and task force members suggested that more could be done to encourage high school students to enroll in technical education courses and technical college programs. One speaker recommended that the state school report card could be modified to value technical education course enrollments and placement of graduates in technical college programs. Another speaker suggested requiring internships as part of the high school curriculum, which may require authorizing the Department of Public Instruction to grant waivers to districts that experience hardship in providing internship opportunities to students. Others mentioned that tours of local businesses or technical education programs could be provided to high school counselors or teachers.

Speakers also recommended that certain successful program models, such as the Cardinal Manufacturing program at Eleva-Strum High School, have generated interest from students and could be replicated elsewhere. Speakers mentioned that exposure to high-quality technical education and career opportunities, including direct interactions with local businesses at the high school level, can increase students’ interest in pursuing technical degrees and careers.

### **Importance of Private Sector Participation in Youth Training Programs**

The importance of private sector support and participation was a common theme throughout the testimony before the task force. For example, model high school technical education programs emphasized that forming relationships and garnering support from local industry partners was a key to program success.

However, multiple speakers noted that many private employers are reluctant to hire youth, including youth participating in certified programs such as youth apprenticeships. Speakers suggested that employers in the manufacturing industry might be especially reluctant. Speakers emphasized that one reason for that reluctance is a perception that hiring youth is not allowed for a particular type of work or that hiring youth increases liability. Speakers noted that employers may be unaware that state and federal law allows youth to be hired in most certified youth apprenticeship programs. Speakers recommended that state law should provide incentives for private employers to hire youth, for example, through tax credits. Speakers also noted that companies can participate in workforce readiness in other ways, for example, by becoming involved in high school technical education programs. One speaker recommended that state law be modified to allow high school students working in student-run businesses as part of their high school curriculum to qualify as youth apprentices despite not earning minimum wage.

Finally, speakers mentioned that a publication produced by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) provides an overview of child labor laws, and said that the publication has helped encourage some employers to hire youth. Speakers suggested that additional, similar publications might also be useful.

### **Relative Expense of Technical Education**

Multiple speakers stated that technical education programs are typically more expensive than other high school courses because they require “hands on” education, and because model programs utilize expensive machines. Speakers noted that start-up funds may be available for innovative technical education programs, but that it can be difficult to sustain ongoing funding for the programs. Speakers recommended encouraging private sector support and involvement in technical education programs. For example, it was noted that model high school programs have received donations of surplus equipment from area businesses. One speaker suggested that state law could be modified to allow revenue caps to be exceeded one time for the purchase of equipment for technical education programs. Speakers stated that increasing the class size for technical education courses is not an effective method for reducing cost, because technical education is best taught with low teacher-to-student ratios and opportunities for practical application.

### **Importance of Soft Skills**

A common theme throughout the testimony was that employers view “soft” skills (i.e., nontechnical workplace capabilities, such as promptness, professionalism, and communication)

as being as much, if not more, important than technical skills for ensuring career readiness. One speaker noted that although technical skills are a reason for hiring, soft skills are a reason for firing. Various speakers noted that model high school programs teach soft skills first, and technical skills then follow.

Speakers recommended that soft skills training should be emphasized in schools. Speakers also suggested that increasing participation in youth apprenticeship programs will help youth develop soft skills, because the mentorship component of youth apprenticeship programs can help youth develop such skills.

### **Importance of Engaging Youth at an Earlier Age**

Multiple speakers stated that the average age of initial enrollment in technical college and apprenticeship programs is too high, partly because many students attempt a four-year college first or delay seeking technical training. Generally, speakers suggested increasing student participation in technical and career readiness programs at the high school level (or earlier) and increasing awareness of the high quality jobs available in technical fields as a means of encouraging enrollment in technical colleges immediately after high school. Multiple speakers mentioned the importance of making certificates available through dual enrollment programs, to enable students to more easily enter technical fields immediately after high school, even if they are also enrolled in technical college or four-year college programs. Some speakers noted that in some cases, credit transfer may depend on whether a technical college has negotiated a credit transfer agreement with a particular high school.

### **Shortage of Qualified Technical Education Instructors**

Many business owners and industry groups testified about the worker shortage in fields such as advanced manufacturing and information technology, and noted that the worker shortage is likely to increase with demographic changes. Similarly, high school and technical college administrators noted that it is difficult to attract and retain qualified technical education instructors, partly because there is so much competition for people with technical expertise in the private sector.

Many speakers viewed the shortage of qualified technical instructors as being linked with the shortage of qualified technical workers and suggested that increasing participation in technical education programs could lead to more workers and instructors. Technical college administrators noted that sustainable base funding is crucial for being able to retain talented instructors.

### **Importance of Math Skills**

Speakers noted that increasingly, students must have adequate math skills to work in technical fields such as advanced manufacturing. Several speakers recommended integrating math into technical education curricula and illustrating the practical application of math in

technical education fields. Model programs also often serve as an incentive for students to enroll in math courses, because students see a practical application for the skills.

### **Importance of Emphasizing the WorkKeys Test**

The ACT “WorkKeys” test assesses both “hard” (i.e., technical) and “soft” workplace skills. It also provides a certification upon successful completion. The certification, called the National Career Readiness Certificate, is recognized by some employers. The test is required to be administered in Wisconsin, but various speakers stated that the test is not sufficiently emphasized in the state. Speakers recommended that the WorkKeys test should be emphasized as much as the ACT is emphasized. They also suggested that the timing of administering the test could be adjusted to be earlier.

### **Transportation is a Barrier to Participation**

Various speakers noted that transportation is often a barrier to participation in job readiness programs such as internships and job shadowing, particularly at the high school level.

Some speakers, including a transition coordinator who assists high school students with disabilities to find employment, emphasized the importance of having schools provide transportation (or assist with facilitating access to public transit) for students. Speakers also suggested that options should be explored for providing driver education to students attending high schools that do not currently offer driver education.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE CHAIR**

As chair of the task force, I recommend the following options for potential legislative action:

- **School report card.** Modify the state school report card to value technical education course enrollments and the placement of graduates in technical college programs.
- **High school entrepreneurship programs.** Encourage the replication of programs like the Cardinal Manufacturing program at Eleva-Strum High School, located in Strum, Wisconsin, in high schools in other locations.
- **Exception to levy limits.** Consider providing an exception to general local levy limits for the purchase of equipment used in technical education programs.
- **Math skills.** Encourage the integration of math skills in technical education curricula, and the integration of technical education projects in math curricula.
- **DWD grants.** For grants provided by DWD to technical colleges, grant outcome goals could be modified to be tied to regional workforce needs, utilizing regional reports rather than statewide reports. The grants would also be structured to allow for the funding of students’ travel costs, particularly in geographically large technical college

districts. In addition, grant criteria could be modified to allow technical colleges to enroll students during the summer between their junior and senior years.

- **Technical education curriculum clearinghouse.** Direct the Department of Public Instruction to implement a clearinghouse for technical education curricula.

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