

“Workforce + Education = Future”

A Report on the Workforce Development & Education Summit

March 24, 2008

**Hosted by the Innovation Valley, Inc.
Sponsored by Edfinancial Services and South College.**

**Contributed to by the City of Knoxville, Knox County,
the Great Schools Partnership, and Bandit Lites.**

The Summit Report

Background

On December 7, 2007, Knox County Mayor Mike Ragsdale spoke at the Knoxville Chamber calling for more business and community engagement in workforce development and education. He discussed the need for a working summit that would bring together all stakeholders to develop a unified strategy to move us forward. Four months later, on March 24, 2008, nearly six hundred people from across the region met to discuss how we can begin to build a skilled and educated workforce that meets the demands of our region's existing and target industries. The Summit was hosted by Innovation Valley, Inc.¹ and sponsored by Edfinancial Services and South College.² Elected officials, educators from primary to higher education, business people, parents, students, workforce training specialists, and economic developers all came together to learn from one another and tackle our challenges.

This first objective of this working Summit was not to present attendees with answers or to propose solutions. Instead, it was to inform them about the challenges existing in our workforce pipeline and what kind of workforce is needed in the future. With this information, participants were challenged to think about their individual roles in developing the workforce of the future and to share their ideas and suggestions for moving forward. Sharing knowledge and experiences at breakout tables was key to the Summit's success. It is not often that stakeholders have the opportunity to collaborate with one other on issues critical to the growth and development of our community. This day was intended to mark the beginning of this collaboration and forge strong partnerships.

General Session

Led by City of Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam, the general session set the stage for the rest of the Summit. Mayor Ragsdale's comments addressed the importance of and urgency in building a skilled and educated workforce. He described how such a workforce is directly tied to a prosperous economy. Next, Dr. Matt Murray, Associate Director of the UT Center of Business and Economic Research, informed participants about the state of our workforce pipeline, perceptions of education and community, and the characteristics of a competitive workforce. Finally, Mayor Haslam facilitated a panel of regional superintendents about common challenges they face in their school systems such as attracting and retaining effective teachers and meeting higher standards in the classroom with the support of local community and business expertise. This panel was composed of members of the Superintendent Coalition³, a newly formed group of superintendents from the Innovation Valley representing Knox County, Oak Ridge, Clinton City, Anderson County, Maryville City, Blount County, Alcoa, and Roane County schools.

Breakout Observations

The first breakout sessions following the general session were designed to address issues of student learning in the primary and secondary levels of education. The breakout topics themselves were conceived through collaboration with the Superintendent Coalition, the Great Schools Partnership, and with Innovation Valley Inc.'s regional workforce development strategy. The topics were: Developing a Communications Strategy, Making Learning Relevant, Business and Community Engagement, and Effective Teaching. The second set of breakout sessions were linked to the previous topics but were more focused on workforce development issues in post-secondary education and beyond. They were: Bridging the Gap between Higher Ed and Business, Workforce Training, Engaging the Under-utilized Workforce, and Attracting and Retaining a Quality Workforce. Educators, business people, parents and others were present to ensure that several perspectives were heard and shared. Members of the community who are already very active in workforce development and education led the various breakout discussions. These individuals were instrumental in facilitating discussions and introducing Summit participants to some of the current activities in regional workforce development.

The relatively brief breakout sessions were structured to focus more on challenges and barriers rather than solutions and answers. Summit participants were asked to think about information presented in the opening session, and then, along the lines of their breakout topic, identify barriers hindering the achievement of a skilled and educated workforce. Most facilitators then asked participants to identify ways that they could personally contribute to breaking down the barriers. Although each breakout was structured differently, each ultimately found many commonalities in our regional challenges. This fact became even more apparent upon examining and comparing the notes from each session, as you can see in 'Appendix 1'.

Themes of **communication** and **stakeholder engagement** were prevalent in all of the breakout sessions, and thus, will be the foundations of our future action plans.

Communication

Communication in various forms was central to almost every discussion at the Summit. Whether it was with regard to a lack of awareness of existing resources or to negative perceptions about skilled trade jobs, establishing a channel of communication among educators, business, parents and students was at the top of attendees' minds. In the chart below, common communication barriers that were identified throughout the breakouts are listed along with corresponding suggestions to overcome them. Referenced in Appendix 1, there were many ideas shared and recorded at the Summit. This chart strives to represent the most common threads relating to communication issues.

Communication Issues

Issue Identified	Takeaways
<p>Lack of Awareness of Existing Resources – Many resources that are needed already exist and are available to the public, but for whatever reason, are unknown to most of the general public. They remain largely untapped because of silos and unsuccessful efforts to communicate these resources to more people.</p>	<p>In order to avoid duplication of resources and services and to build upon those that are effective, we need to learn about available opportunities and share them with the public. We need to reach more people – students, teachers, and parents.</p>
<p>The Value of Education – Apathy and misperceptions continue to exist in our community and are standing in the way of our improving the state of education, and ultimately, our future workforce. Misperceptions include the stigma of skilled trade jobs, the available workforce in under-utilized sectors, or the need for a “two track” system; apathy is among those who believe education doesn’t concern them or that “it was good enough for them.”</p>	<p>In order to overcome negative or inaccurate perceptions about education and our future workforce, we need to educate the community on the facts. All stakeholders need to know what is at stake here, why they should care, and how they can help. We need to understand the importance of eradicating apathy.</p>
<p>Disconnect between Learning to Practice - Somewhere along the way, a gap between education and real-world applications occurred. Students are not leaving school (high school or college) with what the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the workplace.</p>	<p>In order to prepare our future workforce and make learning relevant, there must be an open channel of communication between business and education (secondary and higher ed). Business must communicate their needs to educators and then help demonstrate the relevance of that knowledge to students. This message must also be understood by parents.</p>
<p>Alignment of educational levels – Similar to the disconnect between education and workforce, secondary educators and students need to understand what is expected at the post-secondary education level.</p>	<p>There needs to be clearly defined alignment between K-12 and the post-secondary education communities. They need an open and sustainable line of communication.</p>

It is clear from this chart that we have much work to do in terms of informing the community about useful information and available resources. We discovered that many people do understand and are trying to make a difference in how we educate and develop our future and current workforce. So, how do we expand on existing efforts and involve more of the community? It is also clear that business needs to be loud, clear, and specific about what they need in the workplace and then be there to help communicate those needs. How is that currently being done, who is doing it, and is it working?

These are questions that require additional information gathering and sharing, but then most importantly, action on the part of all stakeholders.

Business and Community Engagement

All Summit participants called for more business and community engagement.⁴ Most were very explicit in their call for engagement: it must happen early, be sustainable, measurable, and active. Accountability for all stakeholders – parents, educators, students and business - was also mentioned as an important element of engagement. Finally, business and community engagement must happen in conjunction with a long-term vision that is shared among all stakeholders and must be organized to keep track of progress and volunteers.

The rationale for more meaningful business and community engagement stems from two motives. The first is one of accountability. We all have an obligation to take responsibility for how our future workforce is prepared because it is of concern to us all. The second is one of efficiency. It is more advantageous for businesses to get involved earlier in the training of their future workforce than later when they need remediation or are lacking in numbers. Concerns over whether this added engagement would be welcome were voiced, but overall it was a matter of getting more people properly informed and mobilized. This also overlaps with the communications issues previously mentioned in that we must communicate the incentives of engagement to both community and business.

Mentoring and professional development were two recurring methods of engagement. Mentoring was mentioned in several arenas that could help students advance in both knowledge and skills. Whether it is character development through “Character Counts!” or other types of mentoring through “Big Brothers Big Sisters”, volunteers could step in early and offer skills and knowledge as well as guidance to students that would serve them for life.⁵ It was also mentioned during the Superintendent Panel and in breakouts that there is a variety of non-academic issues that teachers deal with every day. The community needs to embrace any ideas that would help to alleviate these pressures in the classroom.

Mentoring is not a new concept in our region. In fact many people mentor in and outside of our local schools. But it is happening on a small scale and should be expanded to reach more students and be more effective. Again, a communications strategy that shared these opportunities and explained their need for them is critical in improving engagement.

Professional development was also cited, mostly by educators, as a way by which they can enhance their skills and learn what they should be teaching our future workforce. Part of this development may derive from peer-to-peer relationships and best-practice sharing, but it also involves guidance by and interaction with local employers. Engagement by local employers is very important because they can expose educators to the real-world applications of the material that they are teaching every day. Again, this is not something new in our region, but it is something that needs to be expanded to more than just a select few.

Other Widespread Observations

An observation that was frequently made was the need to incorporate more technology in teaching and learning. Whether it is in K-12 classrooms or in retraining retirees, we must be able to prepare them with current and relevant technology. Our technological skills and resources must be upgraded to keep up with the pace of change. Businesses thrive on change and have no choice but to maintain their operations and continue to grow. The way we educate our future workforce and reengage under-utilized sectors of the workforce must change to keep up with the changing economy and rapidly evolving technology.

Another shared idea was that we need to market our assets as a region and community in order to attract people to our area. It also followed that we need to bring the community together to celebrate and build upon our successes.

Finally, attendees made it clear that in order to improve student outcomes (e.g. graduation rates) engagement and action must happen early in students' education. We need to expose students to careers and skills and also help them identify their strengths and weaknesses in elementary and middle school years. While many students have a support network at home sadly many do not. We need to intervene when it is apparent that any student is not getting what he or she needs.

Next steps

1. Taking Inventory. First, it is important to identify what is already happening in terms of preparing our future workforce to move forward. This could include mentoring, internships, or identification of other resources that are not widely known. The point is acknowledging what is currently taking place, identifying how those are currently meeting our needs, and then building upon those opportunities. There is no reason to continue operating within silos or to "recreate the wheel." We challenge the community – students, parents, educators, public and private sector folks – to begin collecting information on what is currently available. To jumpstart this effort, we have begun to list the existing activities and programs, found in 'Appendix 2.'

2. Awareness Campaign. We must discuss next steps for our communication and engagement plans. We will need to figure out how to increase the awareness of the opportunities and resources that already exist to the general public and also begin to work on an even greater message about the value of education. Developing this message with a consistent and common language is critical to promoting the value of education so that we may advance the level of learning and workforce preparedness in our community.

3. Effective Teaching & Relevance. The notion of relevance in the classroom was mentioned throughout Summit discussion. It is recommended that a taskforce be formed to shape policies and coordinate activities relating to the following issues.

a. *Getting educators into the real-world.* Educators were aware that they needed more professional development, in terms of real-world training and exposure to application of the material that they are charged with teaching. This could be accomplished through summer internships, in-service opportunities at business locations, or mentoring. These opportunities exist on a small scale but as a community, we need to figure out how to expand these opportunities so that all students will receive up-to-date instruction on how their school work translates into the real-world practices.

b. *Getting the real-world into the classroom.* The second piece to this issue is figuring out ways to get businesses into schools to directly impact student learning. Whether it is a special guest lecture, tutoring, or help with after school competitions, business and community engagement at the school level should be available and welcome. Again, there are examples of ways that business can get involved in the classroom, such as Vols4Stem.⁶ This is a new initiative whereby science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) professionals can work with educators and their students to help make the connection between classroom learning and science, technology, and math practices in the workplace. We need to support programs like this and also expand them for learning outside of STEM.

c. *Attracting and Retaining Quality Teachers.* There were several issues that were noted with regard to attracting and retaining teachers. Ideas such as differentiated pay and improving support systems were mentioned as ways to attract and retain qualified teachers in the classroom. We must continue this dialogue and include all stakeholders to bring about the political will that will be needed for change.

4. Bridging the Gap between Education and Business. In addition to making classroom learning more relevant, a gap still exists in students' education about what exactly goes on in industry and what opportunities exist for them after school. It was mentioned again and again at the Summit that students need early exposure to careers and the skills associated with them. The Higher Ed Forum⁷ is a group of post-secondary educators and administrators who have already begun this conversation. A taskforce from this forum and others outside of the post-secondary community will form to address these concerns.

a. *Training opportunities (internships, apprenticeships, co-ops).* It was mentioned earlier that we need to take inventory of training opportunities at both the high school and post-secondary level. Dialogue between business leaders and educators is needed to clearly understand

how effective and productive this training can be and how to expand these existing opportunities. Students and families need to be made aware of these opportunities.

b. Career introduction and guidance. Address the stigma of certain professions. It also must be determined how and when students are currently being introduced to careers and then how they are guided through that process. Again, this will require research and building relationships with individuals who are currently providing this information to students. Students and parents must also be made aware of what jobs are out there and the quality of life attached with each of those jobs.

c. Future needs analysis. One of the things that educators at both secondary and post-secondary levels want to know is what skills and training businesses will need in the future. Post-secondary educators in particular want to know about specific equipment and technology that businesses are investing in and how they can prepare students to enter the workforce immediately upon receiving that training. At both levels, the goal is to prepare students who do not need remediation or retraining as they enter the workforce. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Building trusty relationships between business leaders and educators is critical and must be continuous and sustainable.

5. Under-Utilized Workforce. As expected, many of the under-utilized sectors of the workforce mentioned common concerns of negative perceptions and the need to form better relationships with employers. Therefore, a taskforce should be formed to shape policies and coordinate activities relating to the following issues.

a. How do we get a united message out? Former military personnel, persons with disabilities, ex-offenders, and the aging all have messages that they want to get out about reasons they would make good employees. Many are currently under-employed and are quite capable in many ways. A taskforce could develop individual messages for each of these groups, which would include describing their potential contributions to the workforce as well as the incentives and reasons to hire them.

b. Open workplace environment. Many employers across the country have found ways to capitalize on this hidden segment of the workforce. Companies like Walgreens and Kroger's have taken advantage of tax credits and open workplace environments to attract workers with good work ethics and skills that might otherwise have been rejected by other employers. Researching best practices will be useful in this task.

6. Attracting & Retaining a Quality Workforce. Attracting and retaining a quality workforce was a hot topic at the Summit. It was clear that both young and older members of the community are

interested in making the Innovation Valley an attractive place for people to come and stay. Participants in this dialogue identified many ways to continue this dialogue about how to accomplish that goal. It is recommended again that a taskforce be formed to work on the following next steps.

a. Ask Youth. One idea is to engage young students – in high school and college – in an ongoing discussion about what they value in a community and what would make them want to stay here. Employers and regional planners would be remiss not to understand what will keep fresh and innovative talent in this region.

b. Workplace friendly. There are several examples of what employers can do to make their workplace more open to the next generation of our workforce. Many young persons might not be necessary motivated by money. Instead it might be time, work environment or access to superiors. Whatever it is, it would be extremely valuable for an employer to invest in learning what it might take to retain their best employees. Employers and young professionals should work together to find arrangements that work for both of them and that will ultimately keep a quality workforce in this region.

In order to maintain momentum, it is recommended that we convene again soon to discuss next steps in more detail. At an event in early June, we hope to recognize current efforts and then begin piecing together a unified vision of a skilled and educated workforce. Much like the Summit, all stakeholders are encouraged to attend and begin focusing on action items that were identified through Summit feedback. Each of the following courses of action involves communication and community engagement, and consequently serious coordination efforts on the part of Innovation Valley, Inc., the Great Schools Partnership, and other partnering organizations. Business and community volunteers must decide where their time and effort is most effectively spent, and we will need to determine how to measure these efforts. When we meet again in June, we will discuss how this coordination will take place and how we can mobilize even greater numbers of the community in this effort.

More details about the June meeting will follow. Please fill out the form below and let us know any efforts that you or your organization makes with respect to these areas of engagement in workforce development and education. We would like to recognize these contributions during this meeting and increase awareness of what is happening in the region.

Please check the Knoxville Chamber website for other updates and news: www.knoxvillechamber.com.

Evaluations

Attached to this report ('Appendix 3') is an anonymous list of feedback derived from our evaluations. In general, we were pleased with the Summit's attendance and the discussion that

arose as a result of the breakouts. It is clear that dialogue needs to continue about each of these issues.

Dialogue, however, is not enough. We must take action based on information and data gathered through dialogue and serious planning. The Summit served as an important first step.

Please fill out this form and be specific. Send prior to May 20, 2008.

Contact information below.

Name/Organization: _____

Contact Info: Address _____

Email _____ Phone _____

I/We currently contribute(s) to our region's workforce development in the following way(s):

	Please describe:	Extent/Scope (e.g. # of volunteers, # reached)
<u>Training</u> (Internships, Apprenticeships, Co-Ops)		
<u>Mentoring/Tutoring</u>		
<u>Services/Resources</u>		
<u>Other</u>		

Send to:

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¹ Innovation Valley, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) organization that will serve as the support organization for the partners participating in the regional economic development campaign. The partners are the Blount County Chamber of Commerce, the Knoxville Chamber, the Loudon County Economic Development Agency, the Oak Ridge Economic Partnership, The Roane Alliance, and the Tellico Reservoir Development Agency. Workforce Development and Education is one of the pillars that forms the Economic Development Strategic Blueprint.

² Special thanks to contributing sponsors: City of Knoxville, Knox County, Great Schools Partnership, and Bandit Lites.

³ Those serving on the panel at the Summit were: Ken Green, Assistant Superintendent of Oak Ridge Schools; Donna Wright, Assistant Superintendent of Knox County Schools; Stephanie Thompson, Superintendent of Maryville City Schools; Bob Thomas, Assistant Superintendent of Knox County Schools; Dr. Toni McGriff, Superintendent of Roane County Schools; and Vicki Violette, Superintendent of Clinton City Schools. Superintendents from Loudon County, Anderson County, Hamblen County, Alcoa, Lenoir City and Campbell County were very supportive of the Superintendent Coalition but were unable to attend the Summit.

⁴ See Appendix 1: Breakout Notes.

⁵ See the “What To Do For Schools” document listed as Appendix 2.

⁶ More information about Vols4Stem can be found at www.vols4stem.org.

⁷ The Higher Ed Forum was a group invited by the Knoxville Chamber and Innovation Valley, Inc. to discuss common challenges that the post-secondary community is experiencing. More information can be found at www.knoxvillechamber.com.