Workforce + Education = Future

Workforce Development & Education Summit Follow-up

Minutes from June 10, 2008

Hosted by Innovation Valley, Inc.
Sponsored by EdFinancial Services and South College
June 10, 2008

**Background**

On March 24, 2008 nearly six hundred people from across the area came together to discuss the challenges facing the Knoxville region regarding workforce development. The event began with Knox County Mayor Mike Ragsdale speaking to the significance of a strong workforce on increased economic development. Following Mayor Ragsdale, Dr. Matt Murray, Associate Director of the UT Center of Business and Economic Research apprised the attendees of the current state of our workforce pipeline. Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam then facilitated discussion on education with a panel composed of members of the Superintendent Coalition\(^1\). Following the panel discussion, all attendees adjourned to breakout sessions on various topics\(^2\) pertaining to workforce development and education. During the event on March 24, 2008, it was determined that a follow-up meeting was needed to begin developing action items to move forward in the process of having a prepared workforce.

**June 10: General Session**

On March 24\(^{th}\), many participants identified programs and ideas that would be helpful in breaking down the barriers that exist in developing a world-class workforce, such as mentoring and providing more opportunities for internships. The first thirty minutes of this two-hour event began with an exhibition of organizations and programs that currently exist and strive to improve our education and workforce development system. There were twenty participants from business, education, non-profit and government sectors who displayed their programs and provided an opportunity for the community to learn about what is already going on in the region.

Following this exhibition, Mayor Ragsdale welcomed the participants to the event, including fifteen students from area high schools. Mayor Ragsdale then facilitated a question-and-answer session with a panel of various stakeholder groups about their perspectives on education and the development of our future workforce\(^3\). For instance, the student featured on this panel, a rising senior at Gibbs High School, clearly articulated students' need to understand the "why" of learning. Representatives from Energy Solutions spoke to the need for more communication between business and higher education institutions regarding essential skill sets.
Mike Edwards, President and CEO of the Knoxville Chamber then charged attendees with developing concrete action steps to begin overcoming the barriers that were identified during the Summit. Attendees then moved into five individual sessions to address specific areas pertaining to workforce development and education. The taskforces were focused on developing a “Communications Campaign,” “Effective Teaching/Relevance,” “Attracting and Retaining a Quality Workforce,” “Bridging the Gap Between Higher Ed and Business”, and “Engaging the Under-Utilized Workforce.”

**Communications Campaign**

At the Summit on March 24th, it was evident that the community at large was not aware of the current truths regarding our students’ preparation for life after high school. In this breakout, it was determined that our community would benefit from a strong communications campaign demonstrating the importance of our placing a high value on education. The assumption is that if all citizens in the community value education and understand how important it is to our future economic well-being, more people will be engaged in ensuring that students are prepared to enter the workforce. Thus, the “Communications Campaign” taskforce was formed.

This taskforce met on May 21, 2008 to begin planning for the June 10th event. During that meeting, participants worked on developing a uniform message that could be communicated on a grass roots level. On June 10, 2008, approximately forty people discussed the content of this message. Next steps include working with marketing professionals to determine how to brand and deliver the messages discussed and then pulling together this taskforce again to determine an ultimate distribution strategy. It was mentioned that some public messages already exist, such as the Public School Forum’s Public Service Announcements (“PSAs”), and therefore it may be that we build on these PSAs and use them to inform and motivate the community.4

**Effective Teaching/Relevance**

After reviewing the Summit notes and discussing the amount of information overlap for these two categories, the “Effective Teaching” and “Making Learning Relevant” groups were combined into one group.

On June 10th, taskforce discussion divided into three groups: Effective Teaching, Relevance in Teaching, and Vols4STEM. Ideas discussed included benchmarking, recruiting local leaders to connect with educators in related content areas, and looking at ways to increase exposure of teachers and students to the workplace through internships and apprenticeships.
As next steps, we are identifying and looking to build upon ongoing efforts to achieve these ideas. We recognize the difficulty of developing an action plan with a large group and therefore will likely narrow the scope of a proposed action plan in order to engage the community more effectively.

The Vols4STEM program enlists the services of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) society members as a support to classroom teachers of the STEM disciplines. Some contacts were made at this meeting as well as requests for classroom speakers. Leaders of Vols4STEM are now working hard to stimulate more support from society members, without which this program will not succeed.

**Attracting & Retaining a Quality Workforce**

The premise of this taskforce is to capitalize on the assets of our region in order to fill workforce gaps by attracting and retaining young professionals to the area. After evaluating different ways to do this, this group decided to develop a promotional program to increase awareness of opportunities and benefits of living in the region. Taskforce members have been charged to look at best practices in other areas. They will continue to work on who will be targeted and how in a follow-up meeting at the Knoxville Chamber on June 26th, 2008, from 11:30am – 1:00pm. Please contact Ahnna Estes at aestes@knoxvillechamber.com if you are interested in attending this meeting.

**Bridging the Gap Between Higher Ed & Business**

This taskforce was formed to look at strengthening the link between higher education and business. On June 10th it was evident that there are many successful activities already occurring in area schools, and therefore this group will break up into smaller subgroups, one in particular looking at benchmarking and how best practices can be shared among the group. The other groups include communications and a job fair/career expo strategy. Leaders of these groups are currently formulating plans, which will be updated on our site as they evolve. The role and importance of organizations like the Tennessee Association of Colleges and Employers (TACE) were also discussed and will be researched further.

**Engaging the Under-Utilized Workforce**

Review of the information from the March Summit uncovered the common problem of a lack of skill among all segments of the under-utilized workforce. To begin addressing this deficiency, a presentation outlining the Tennessee Career Readiness Certificate program and WorkKeys was made to the participants of this taskforce. In addition to informing them of this
new statewide program, they facilitated discussion about how to communicate this information to employers and job seekers. A promotional plan will be developed among the local Workforce Investment Area administrators and the Knoxville Chamber very soon and we will be reaching out to employers and job seekers about how to best take advantage of this program.

With regard to stigmas that are attached to certain groups of the under-utilized workforce, it is recommended that these groups connect to discuss how to go about dispelling those myths in the workplace. The Chamber is open to hosting these meetings and look to the leaders of this taskforce to help organize such an effort.

**Next Steps**

We appreciate all of the feedback and information gained at the meetings on March 24 and June 10, 2008. To maintain momentum and remain mindful of the community’s time, the Chamber and taskforce leaders will continue to work on designing timelines and action plans for the challenges identified at these meetings. There are no plans to bring back the entire group of summit participants at this moment. Instead, we will work in smaller groups to narrow our efforts to manageable and focused action items.

Now is the time to coordinate efforts and work together to maximize our resources. If you would like to join any of the above-mentioned groups, please don’t hesitate to find more information on our website about next meetings or to contact the Chamber.\(^5\)

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1. 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. Teni 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.

2. See “A Report on the Workforce Development & Education Summit” which can be found at [www.knoxvillechamber.com](http://www.knoxvillechamber.com)

3. The panel of stakeholder members included Tony LaMance, HR Manager and Sharon Templeton, Community Relations Representative from EnergySolutions; Principal Clifford Davis, Karnes High School; Pamela Tracy, parent’s perspective; Christie Estes, Student Gibbs High School; and Tierney Bates, University of Tennessee with the young professional’s perspective.

4. These PSAs can be found here: [http://publicschoolforum.org/](http://publicschoolforum.org/)
5 Knoxville Chamber website: www.knoxvillechamber.com; Ahnna Estes may be reached at 246-2658 or aestimatedes@knoxvillechamber.com; Jennifer Evans can be reached at 246-2641 or jevans@knoxvillechamber.com.