

Center of Workforce Innovations
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The Center of Workforce Innovations, Inc., an Indiana 501c3, brings private sector leaders together with policy makers from government, education, economic development, labor, and community-based organizations to analyze regional labor market trends, needs, and issues, in order to develop strategic workforce solutions for the system in northwest Indiana.

What will the future be for our children in a world of increasing technological change and international global competition? Maybe the more important question is are we adequately preparing our young people for the challenges? I know that schools are making changes, but experts tell us changes are occurring in the workplace at a rate that is five times faster. Also, are we giving enough emphasis to math and science? What about the importance of reading and literature? Is Shakespeare still relevant in this brave new world? Answering these questions is difficult, but all of who are concerned about our children, need to ask them, especially those of us who are educators and who have a stake in the success of education. That's just about everyone, isn't it!

How we close the gap between the world of work and the world of education is a matter of profound consequence, not only for our children in the future, but students today. At a recent Peer to Peer Youth Conference, sponsored by the Center of Workforce Innovations, we had the opportunity to hear from one of the world's foremost experts on education reform, Dr. Willard Daggett. Over 30 presenters took part from the Great Lakes states, as well as local educators who have made their mark. But it was the international reformer who is a consultant to seven governors, an advisor to General Motors, and a number of overseas education ministers that had the attention of administrators, educators and community leaders. Ironically, Daggett was speaking to those concerned about helping our young people prepare for the workplace, but his message was as timely and important for the business community, maybe even more so.

Probably his most important message was that the skills learned in the workplace were higher than the skills learned in the educational system. They were not only higher, but they were different. Workers are increasingly using probability, statistics, and measurement systems, Daggett asserts. In education, we're holding to techniques that we've used for years, while the rest of the industrialized world is doing a better job of preparing students for the workplace. Just one example involved 29 countries requiring students to take a test in technical manuals. "Not one state requires one day of study in this area," Daggett said.

His second key point was the routine, concrete and sequential tasks will be taken over by technology. While this will lessen our burden on consumers, it will have profound consequences for students who fail to learn the academics that underpin our technological society. He said computer capacity alone is doubling every 18 months. His point: our youth needs critical thinking, problem solving and computer skills. He cited an example of Ireland becoming the place where the vast majority of insurance claims are processed. Satellites instantly send health forms to processors. There, students are required to take four years of technical reading. Meanwhile, 27% all jobs in this country involve information processing. In 2005, 65% of all jobs will require some understanding of technology. "As technology grows, the world will not need Indiana's dropouts and graduates unless they are adequately prepared in real world knowledge," he said.

Lastly, his third key point is that if we want to change education, then we must have a "fire in the belly" passion. Too often, we are reluctant to make changes, but if we know the facts, people will accept the need to change a culture that is resistant to innovation. Now, let me assert that our region has outstanding educators and successful programs, and at our conference, we showcased a number of sterling examples. Even Dr. Daggett acknowledged their importance, but he described them as a "few random examples" of successful school-to-work initiatives, rather than indicators of sweeping systematic change.

The fact remains, we have to keep raising the bar for our students and ourselves. The world is demanding higher performing students and higher performing workplaces. Regarding the importance of reading and literature, Daggett asserted that they are very important, but they are only part of the answer to prepare students for today's challenging world. So let's step up the needed changes in education, and make sure that our random successes become routine tasks.