

Building Wisconsin's Economic Future

Wisconsin has a long and proud history of providing an unmatched quality of life and as a great place to live, work and play. We have one of the best educational systems in the country, a strong manufacturing and agricultural economic base, and some of our nation's most valuable natural resources.

While we have enjoyed greatness in the past, we must also realize that the economic landscape is changing rapidly. No magical answer exists to tell us how to ensure Wisconsin's vital economy and high quality of life, but one thing is for sure: Wisconsin's reliance on manufacturing and agriculture must be balanced by significant new opportunities that are knowledge-based, technologically innovative, and global in scope. This "new economy" embraces intellectual capital and requires lifelong learning. To build Wisconsin's economic future we must understand some of the realities of our economy and the role education can play in ensuring economic prosperity for all citizens.



Elizabeth Cunnister

Wisconsin's future is at stake from many perspectives.

Despite nearly a decade of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation, the per-capita income in Wisconsin of \$25,079 remains below the national average of \$26,412. We know that future economic growth for Wisconsin cannot come from simply creating new jobs in existing industries. Wisconsin must also explore new frontiers of technology and develop innovative strategies to create a new economic marketplace.

We are also facing a labor shortage. Wisconsin has the highest labor participation rate in the U.S. That means almost every eligible person over seventeen years old is currently working. Our future cannot depend on creating more jobs because we will not have the workers to fill them. The only solution is to create higher paying knowledge-based jobs supported by expanded educational opportunities for all.

Building Wisconsin's economic future starts with a solid educational foundation. We have a proven record of success in the last century. What will it take in the new century? What opportunities will exist for our most valuable resource, our youth? What are some paths to a sound economic future for both Wisconsin and for individual citizens? How can we help the students of today become good, caring and responsible citizens of the future?

Let us join in ensuring Wisconsin's future by examining the facts around jobs, career opportunities, and education. Please think about, share, and act on this information in your school community. Through our actions, we CAN prepare our students for work and citizenship in a rapidly changing, exciting, and bright future.

Our public school system must continue to be one of Wisconsin's most precious economic assets. Why? Because Wisconsin cannot have a strong and vital economy unless it has a highly educated workforce. Our students perform at or near the top of virtually all national and international measures of performance. For example:

- More than ninety percent of Wisconsin students earn a high school diploma, a rate that is in the top 25% of the nation.
- Wisconsin students score consistently near the top on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests.
- Wisconsin student performance has led the nation on ACT college entrance examinations for the past eight years.

Can we do better? Yes. In particular, we must close the achievement gaps between African American, American Indian, Asian and Hispanic students and their white peers. Students of color lag behind white majority students on all positive education measures: grade point average, scores on standardized tests, course selections, and high school completion rates. Only when ALL students are performing at their highest potential can we ensure that Wisconsin will continue to meet the employment and community needs for a bright future.

Changes in the workplace will be the most significant factor in Wisconsin's future economy. Global competition, computerization, entrepreneurship and a changing economic trade base will continue to influence our economy. Driving Wisconsin's success in the "new economy" will be a highly educated workforce that believes in lifelong learning and is able to adapt well to change.

Another feature needed to support Wisconsin's success will be a flexible and versatile workforce. We have done an excellent job of helping students transition from high school into a four-year public or private college. However, the changing nature of work in Wisconsin means that four-year institutions are clearly not the only place to receive education and training for an economically successful and satisfying career. According to the 1999 Wisconsin Depart-

ment of Workforce Development publications, "The Future of Wisconsin's Workforce," 23% of the jobs of the future will require four or more years of college, while 77% of the jobs will require additional education beyond high school (technical college, apprenticeship, or job-related training).

To prosper in the 21st century, Wisconsin needs more health care workers, machinists, tool and die workers, plumbers, and auto technicians. Wisconsin's vision must be one that raises the expectations of graduates at all levels and prepares them for future success. Technological literacy and skill attainment are fundamental to "new economy" jobs.

Our students must both know about opportunities in the traditional economy and be prepared for jobs in the new economy. Students must also be provided with realistic labor market information, and appropriate exposure to diverse education and training paths for various jobs, and skills necessary for success.

Most young people know very little about their career options and even less about the economy into which they will soon enter. We need to make sure information reaches students so that career decisions are based on both personal interests and abilities, and accurate labor market information.

We must create a seamless educational system that supports lifelong learning through a variety of systems. Although we have done an excellent job of helping students transition from high school to one of our four-year public or private colleges, they are not the only post-secondary institutions that provide post-secondary education and training. Wisconsin has sixteen technical colleges with forty-seven campuses. This technical

college system provides more than 300 occupational and technical degree programs. We must discuss post-secondary success first, and then the specific educational and training routes that lead to that success.

The U.S. Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 2000) defined competencies, skills and personal qualities that need to be developed by school communities to ensure success in life and work for students. These are as follows:

- interpersonal skills - the student can work on teams, works well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds, demonstrates individual responsibilities, self-management and integrity;
- information skills - the student can acquire and evaluate data;
- technology skills - the student can apply technology to specific tasks;
- basic skills - reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, speaking and listening;
- thinking skills - ability to learn, reason, think creatively, make decisions and solve problems.

It used to be easy. The more education you had, the more money you would make. But that is not necessarily the case any longer, especially in a labor market which places a premium on technical skills.

How do we continue to help our schools and citizens take the steps necessary to ensure a bright personal and collective economic future?

The following are ways that school staff, parents and young people can understand the nature and educational implications of the new economy, as well as making sure that our students are better prepared to successfully perform in the "new economy."

What can a school do?

- Recognize the need for **all** staff to become knowledgeable and responsive to the rapidly changing expectations of the workforce in the "new economy."
- Recognize the need for **all** staff to become knowledgeable about the skills that students will need in order to be successful in the "new economy;" model as well as teach these skills.
- Implement comprehensive career development programs starting at the elementary level and continuing through high school; create a modest level of career maturity among high school seniors.
- Provide students with instruction and guidance on the nature of new economy jobs, the high school coursework that will prepare them for these jobs, and the post-secondary options available to obtain the high skill/high wage jobs.
- Send messages that are consistent with the realities of the labor market.
- Send the message to all students that a high school diploma is required of future workers and citizens in the "new economy."
- Educate ALL of our children. Make it a priority to close the achievement gap that exists between majority and minority students.
- Provide families and community members knowledge about the skills and training needs of the "new economy."
- Provide families and community members knowledge about the nature of the "new economy" jobs and employment opportunities.

What can a student do?

- Become knowledgeable about traditional and “new economy” job opportunities.
- Know the “supply and demand” principles and how this will affect jobs and careers in the future.
- Become knowledgeable about the requirements needed to be successful in the “new economy.”
- Take coursework that will prepare you for jobs and careers in the “new economy.”
- Participate in career development activities and explore your options.
- Know that a four-year degree does not ensure job placement. Job placement is dependent on “supply and demand” and the skills needed for jobs in high-demand careers.

What can a parent do?

- Know the facts—high earnings are a reward for skills in demand. The path to economic security for your children requires them to obtain skills that are in demand and necessary for the “new economy” and high skill/high wage jobs.
- Ensure that your school offers and implements a comprehensive career development program K-12 that an Individual Career Plan (ICP) for each child.
- Get actively involved in your child’s career exploration activities and course selections.
- Focus on post-secondary success and not simply on school admission requirements.
- Do not confuse education with occupational skills.
- Consider two-year post-secondary technical education that can lead to a four-year degree.
- Know the odds and know the costs of all kinds of post-secondary education.

Resources

Department of Workforce Development:

<http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/dwelmi/>

Occupational Information Network:

<http://online.onetcenter.org/>

Occupational Outlook Handbook:

<http://stats.bls.gov/ocohome.htm>

America's JobBank: <http://www.ajb.dni.us/>

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