

## **STW and Gender Equity: Opportunity or Barrier to Economic Parity?**

***by Katherine Hanson, Joyce Malyn-Smith, & Vivian Guilfooy***

Women and men with specialized technical training can expect to earn half a million dollars more in their lifetime than someone who is working at a low-skill, minimum wage job.<sup>1</sup> This statement alone is enough to indicate the potential of the new school to work transition movement to impact the lives of women and men who might otherwise be channeled into repeating the cycle of poverty. School to work (STW) holds promise for many, while at the same time enabling us to imagine what equitable education for all students can mean. STW, in its broadest vision, is a model for opening up the educational system through partnerships with the workplace, a model that can create access for students who have been locked out of the traditional routes to academic and economic success. STW can contextualize learning for all students; it can introduce students to a range of employment options, including careers in technology. And it can provide opportunities for students to enter and succeed in higher education.

### **What is School-to-Work?**

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, or Federal Public Law 103-329 (H.R. 2884) was signed into law in May 1994. Implications for gender equity are woven throughout the Act, and opportunities abound for the development of comprehensive partnerships and curriculum that address content, pedagogy, student assessment, and the infusion of equity and diversity considerations. For example, the intent of the Act is "to increase opportunities for minorities, women, and individuals with disabilities, by enabling individuals to prepare for careers that are not traditional for their race, gender, or disability." "All students" are defined as both male and female students from a broad range of backgrounds and circumstances, and "career guidance and counseling" programs are to be

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*Voice*. New York State Occupational Education Equity Resource Center, March 1993.

those which develop career options "with attention to surmounting gender, race, ethnic, disability, language, or socioeconomic impediments."<sup>2</sup>

The Act provides development as well as implementation grants to states; waivers of statutory and regulatory program requirements; direct implementation grants to communities; and direct grants to high poverty areas. Currently, eight states have implementation grants: Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Wisconsin. All other states have planning grants to help prepare for the next round of funding. However, given the current federal budget discussions, the future of STW funding is still unclear.

The Act allows programs to address local needs and respond to changes in the local economy and labor market. States and localities can build STW systems upon existing successful programs, such as youth apprenticeship, tech-prep education, cooperative education, career academies, and school-to-apprenticeship programs. The legislation also promotes the coordination of state, local, and other federal resources in order to continue the programs when STW funds end. The Act encourages the active and continued involvement of local business, education, union, and community leaders.

Each STW program must include three components:

- Work-based learning that provides a planned program of job training or experiences, paid work experience, workplace mentoring, and instruction in general workplace competencies and a broad variety of elements of an industry
- School-based learning that provides career exploration and counseling, instruction in a career major, a program of study based on high academic and skill standards, at least one year of post secondary education, and periodic evaluations of student's academic strengths and weaknesses
- connecting activities that coordinate involvement of employers, schools, and students, matching students and work-based learning opportunities

and training teachers, mentors and counselors.<sup>3</sup>

The Act defines successful completion of a STW program as a high school diploma, a certificate or diploma from a post secondary institution and, if appropriate, an occupational skill certificate. However, as we begin to develop programs to meet the STW requirements, key concerns arise about equity and diversity. These concerns include the ability of the systems to recruit, retain, and help nontraditional students—girls, males of color, students whose first language is not English, or students with disabilities—succeed. Another concern surfacing in current discussions is whether STW is designed to channel students to high-wage technology-related occupations with little or no access to other careers such as law, education, or the arts. Additionally, the focus on the local job market needs, rather than a national/global view may not take into account the rapidly changing economy or the mobility of individuals within the United States. And, finally, as a new partnership between education and employment, STW programs need to foster a sense of mutuality, addressing concerns that this movement is not driven solely by the needs of business, but rather becomes a partnership in which both education and employment are transformed. Using the analogy of school and producer and business as consumer limits the way in which STW can be viewed and constructed. As the movement emerges, we have the opportunity to a new metaphor; one that signifies the co-construction of new knowledge and new partnerships.

### **Equity and STW**

As STW is grounded in successful vocational education and apprenticeship programs, there may still linger a misconception that it is a vocational education program or that it is not for all students. We risk the danger of falling into old assumptions or stereotypes that will prevent the full participation of all students.

Both research and experience shows young people in vocational programs do

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Legislative Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Labor, prepared by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1993.

best with a wide array of support services. These services are necessary for all students—including those in traditionally academic models. Programs must meet the needs of all students, not just those perceived as being vocationally or technically oriented. If a program is perceived of as one for "the forgotten half" it will become another tracking system, despite the best of intentions. STW needs to build an infrastructure for human development and productivity that includes each student.

If school-to-work programs are for everyone, programs need to pay particular attention to the needs of individuals within specific groups—students who are female, are of color, have disabilities, or who speak a language other than English. We are at a crucial point in the development of school-to-work, a point where we can draw together the best learning and experience from education, equity, community, and the workplace. As we bring this expertise together, we can evolve a new model, disaggregating the data, evaluating our efforts, and refining the work in progress. A rigorous look at how the program works for all students—for each student—provides the opportunity to build a stronger model.

### **Implications for Women and the Work Force**

STW outcomes can be significant for women, but often this population is overlooked in the current discussions about STW. A special focus on the experiences and needs of women is called for as we do research, disaggregate data, and learn from this new initiative.

Women continue to be found in low-wage, dead-end jobs. European American women with five years post secondary education continue to earn 69 cents for every dollar earned by males with similar education<sup>4</sup>. For African American women this ratio is only about 58 cents and 54 cents for Hispanic/Latina women.<sup>5</sup> And, since only 4 percent of U.S. families fit the

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Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1994

Women's Bureau, Department of Labor, 1994

traditional model of man working outside the home, woman working in the home with two preschool children<sup>6</sup> the economic imperative for women's employment is apparent. Women contribute significantly to the family income in two-parent households: in white families women contribute 34 percent of the family income, in African American families, women contribute 50 percent, and in Hispanic families women contribute 40 percent. And, while the number of female-headed households continues to rise, their earning power is significantly less: 47 percent of white female-headed households are below the poverty line and 72 percent of African American female-headed households live in poverty<sup>7</sup>.

If the nation is to be truly productive and if STW programs are to be successful, the targeting and inclusion of women and girls within STW are critical. Based on the experience of vocational education and nontraditional occupations, gender equity specialists can offer guidance and resources to schools and states as they attempt to develop successful STW programs. This knowledge and approach, which covers K-16, can form the basis for highly effective STW programs.

The Act itself acknowledges this. Beginning with the initial planning for STW, states are required to include the gender equity component. For instance, state implementation grant proposals must identify how the state sex equity administrator will be involved and how teachers, administrators, employers, and others will be trained to address the counseling and training needs of women, people of color, linguistic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. This provides the opportunity to introduce successful models developed in vocational education, math and science, and in gender equity as excellent resources, not simply to raise the questions within STW but to offer strategies that work.

### **A Proactive Role for Equity Specialists**

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*Changing Roles of Men and Women: Educating for Equity in the Workplace*, Vocational Studies Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

*Working Women Count: A Report to the Nation*, U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1994.; *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, AAUW and Wellesley Center for Research on Women, 1992.

Equity specialists and advocates need to be assertive in creating a role within the STW system, one in which they can help shape the conversation, provide insights into the needs of specific groups of students, and draw on the strategies and programs that have been successful in other arenas. A recent survey we conducted among the state equity coordinators revealed that STW is an emerging concern, but conversations and planning often overlook the needs of one-half the work force—women. As new collaborations between education, business, and community, many STW groups may not understand the connection of gender equity with STW. Equity specialists need to seek out key individuals within STW for discussions on how gender equity fits and how it will help enhance the program for girls and boys. As in the beginning of nontraditional careers, we need to marshal the argument, with facts, state data, and with examples of successful models. We need to offer specific help to the state or local planning group, spelling out the benefits for officials. These individuals are the entry point for equity specialists.

Key to understanding the implications of gender equity and equity for all students within STW is building a dialogue within the STW community that incorporates the rich expertise and experience of work in nontraditional occupations, math and science for girls, and other equity programs. As states and communities begin planning and implementation, equity specialists can raise a series of key questions that can help infuse equity into the process. Among these are

- How can we help ensure that *all* students in the programs are provided with options leading to productive and rewarding futures? What does it mean to say that STW is for all young people? Is it designed to help all students? How does the STW program use career exploration for all students? How do we ensure that STW explores professional careers, offers career ladders, and broadens the concept of work for all?
- How do we ensure equal access to STW? What do student demographics tell us about who is recruited, and to which programs? What is the

retention and success of individuals in specific grouping—European American males/females, African American males/females, Hispanic males/females, students with disabilities, and so on.? Who is going on to community college, technical college, or university?

- How are programs conducted? Is the program structured so there is a proportional representation of all groups found within the school community? If not, how can this be corrected? Does it offer a career ladder option and a college option? How are students supported in the program? Does it include training on the "Right to Know" law? Does it have policies and procedures regarding sexual and racial harassment in both school-based and work-based components? How are workplaces supported and monitored to encourage equity? What adjustments need to be made to involve students with disabilities? How are the language needs of linguistic minorities addressed? How does the STW program reach out to and include the active participation of parents?
- Is there a special focus on math and science for girls and students of color? How does the program draw on what is known about encouraging and effectively teaching these students? Is the program utilizing proven programs such as Expanding Your Horizons or the Girls Clubs' Project SMART? How could a project such as the Algebra Project enrich STW? How will disparities in computer access, skill, and comfort be addressed both in the classroom and in the workplace? How are math and science integrated into the other disciplines?

Beyond posing the questions, equity specialists can offer suggestions for planning and implementing STW programs that meet the needs of students. Some, as suggested by Mary Wiberg, gender equity coordinator for vocational education in Iowa, include the following:

- Involve classroom teachers (academic and vocational education) in the development of STW programs.
- Involve businesses owned by women and people of color in the planning process

- Involve community-based organizations that have worked with teen parents, gender equity programs, Girl Scouts; and others. to understand how best to attract girls and to meet their needs.
- Train everyone—academic and vocational education teachers, counselors, administrators, employers, labor—in the intent of STW, including the gender equity provisions.
- Involve the elementary schools as well as middle schools to begin the process early—reaching parents and students in ways that help them value STW and nontraditional careers for students, before they are locked in to preconceptions.
- Have special events for specific audiences—expand the idea of the NTO career fairs, provide role models, examine outreach, and target specific messages to girls, students with disabilities, the academically talented, and so on.
- Identify and provide the child care, transportation, or other support services girls, especially teen parents, might need in order for them to be in STW.
- Encourage states to invite representatives from commissions on the status of women or other human rights/advocacy groups to participate in the planning.
- Identify resources which can assist in the training and technical assistance support for white women, people of color, linguistic minorities, and persons with disabilities. The National Coalition for Sex Equity in Education (NCSEE) is one such resource. For information contact business manager, Teddy Martin at 908-735-5045.
- Encourage states to establish a subcommittee on career guidance and counseling with membership that includes elementary, secondary, and post secondary guidance staff and persons knowledgeable about NTO strategies that can be integrated into state plans.

## **Equity Resources for STW**

In response to the requests from state equity coordinators, the WEEA Publishing Center at EDC has developed a series of presentations and workshops on gender equity and STW. Additionally, as part of its new "Equity in Education Series" the center has adapted existing WEEA materials into a booklet, "School to Work: Equitable Outcomes for Girls and Boys," that provides suggestions and resources for educators, administrators, business, and community organizations interested in STW. Information on the training, technical assistance, and booklet can be obtained by contacting the WEEA Publishing Center at 1-800-225-3088 or by e-mail at [WEEAPub@edc.org](mailto:WEEAPub@edc.org).

Additional information and resources can be obtained from the regional Desegregation Assistance Centers, Regional Labs, the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) at 800-762-4093, or the School-to-Work Opportunity Act Information Center at 202-260-7278.

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