



Using Work-Ready Certifications to Align Career Instruction with Industry Needs

Youth Council: Sonoma County Youth Education and Employment Services Council

Element: Career Preparation, Comprehensive Approach, Academic Excellence

Function: Cross Function

Subject: Work Ready Certificate

The Challenge: The Sonoma County Youth Education and Employment Services Council and the Sonoma County Office of Education have been working to align all career-focused instruction with high growth/high demand industry sectors in the county. Currently a wide range of programs exists to expose and prepare young people for life in the workplace. These programs, not always well connected to industry and rarely connected to each other, include Career Technical Education, Regional Occupational Programs, Career Academies, Work Experience Programs, Tech Prep, Career Pathways, and other career-focused instruction at the county's high schools, workforce preparation programs, and the community college. The two agencies wanted to find an effective means of aligning the career-focused instruction with industry needs.

The Practice and Evidence: Together, the partners in this initiative (the Workforce Investment Board, the Economic Development Board, and the County Office of Education) proposed a strategy that will form a county-wide work-ready certification system that will serve as a pipeline to both college and careers in identified high growth and high need industry sectors in the county. The Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board's Youth Education and Employment Services Council developed a plan to create a Work-Ready Certification that can ensure that work-readiness (as defined by business) is a goal within the systems that prepare youth, and that youth can earn a credential that will put them at the "head of the line" when seeking employment in the county. The Work Ready Certificate will build on and document basic workplace, academic, and employability skills that pertain to all industries at the entry level.

The purposes of the Work Ready Certification system are as follows:

- promote rigor and relevance by integrating industry standards into school curriculum;
- carry industry voice to schools;
- add value to the high school diploma; and
- align with the All Youth-One System goal.

The Details: A Work-Ready Certification (WRC) design team comprised of members representing business, education (both K-12 and post secondary), and government began by surveying employers throughout Sonoma County to identify the core skills necessary for entry-level employment.

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Over 200 surveys were collected, and data on the top 20 skills necessary for work readiness were disseminated at the county-wide Youth Symposium in March 2005.

Next the WRC design team created an assessment framework focused on measuring the skills identified by employers. The assessment battery includes multiple methodologies:

- observation rubrics for both worksite supervisors and other adults;
- skills tests in the areas of math, reading, customer service, and computer literacy;
- critical thinking and problem solving scenarios; and
- student-based performance portfolio.

The goals for the certification program are as follows:

- Ensure all youth are successful in the global economy.
- Align education and workforce preparation systems to the skills needed in the global economy.
- Prepare a quality workforce and promote a healthy economy for Sonoma County.

What's Next for this YCidea? To ensure maximum effectiveness of the Work-Ready Certification, a field test will be conducted during the fall of 2005, and the certification process will be refined. Before the certification is launched in January 2006, a county-wide awareness campaign will be launched with appropriate messages for each targeted group: business, educators, students, and parents. Window stickers for businesses such as “We hire Work-Ready”; certificates as recognized elements in student portfolios; “Top Fifteen Skills” posters, bookmarks, and other materials to be used in education and youth development environments will be developed to ensure that work-readiness stays in the forefront of the community’s mind.

Where to Go for More Information

Sonoma County Youth Education and Employment Services Council

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