

# Employer - Educator Summit



Western Iowa Advantage (WIAD)

September 16, 2008

Denison, Iowa

[www.westerniowaadvantage.com](http://www.westerniowaadvantage.com)

October 2, 2008

On behalf of Western Iowa Advantage, we would like to thank you for your participation in the Employer - Educator Summit held in Denison, Iowa, on September 16, 2008. We are very pleased that more than 60 education and business leaders gathered to discuss ways in which we all can work together to address issues of workforce, career opportunities for students, and preparing our young people for the global marketplace.

In opening remarks, Steve Schulz, Provost of Des Moines Area Community College Carroll Campus, and Don Luensmann, Executive Director of the Chamber and Development Council of Crawford County, both stressed the critical need to open up communications and enhance relationships among education and business leaders to strengthen the economic well being of the Western Iowa region. As a result of working together, summit participants hope to provide more opportunities for young Iowans who may want to stay in the area, or return at a later time for good jobs and a superb quality of life. Weaved throughout the conversation of the day was the following central question: "Should we continue to do business and prepare our students for tomorrow the same way we do today?"

All are very aware of declining population and school enrollment in Iowa. In a show of hands, nearly all businesses in attendance indicated the need for more employees. Summit participants aggressively shared their respective points of view, their own concerns, and brought forth ideas that business leaders and educators can work together on accomplishing. As the participants worked through the day in four separate work groups, a variety of issues and strategies were identified. As important, and a major goal of the Summit, was that the lines of communication between educators and businesses began to open up. School Superintendents and business owners shared their own constraints in addressing these vital issues, but all recognized that it was essential to begin this dialogue and continue to work through these challenges and determine how best to move forward.

This report provides an overview of the conversations of those in attendance at the Summit. While it was only a first conversation, it brought to light the shared interests of Western Iowa business and education leadership. As a result of the day's work, there was a strong commitment to continue the discussion and initiate action. An Employer-Educator Work Plan was developed that defines activities and begins to address these shared interests. It is vital to our communities that Summit participants and their colleagues in Western Iowa hold themselves accountable for the action steps outlined in the Work Plan.

*The Employer – Educator Summit* was a first and one-of-a-kind gathering for the state. We thank you for being a part of it and look forward to our continued work together for the region.

Sincerely,

Western Iowa Advantage (WIAD)  
Employer – Educator Summit Planning Committee

Summit participants discussed a number of overarching issues and concerns relating to the larger issue of educating and retaining quality, local workers. Participants agreed that a first step is to begin connecting businesses and schools, to learn to understand each other's needs and constraints, and determine the best ways to proceed. One participant aptly noted that “[educators and business] need a shared philosophy to meet the needs of students and businesses.”

To truly develop a shared philosophy would mean changing the models under which both sectors have functioned for years. Educators are required to ensure that students are meeting national and state standards of achievement, and there is an expectation that students are able to display competencies related to such achievement. While Iowa's new Core Curriculum may raise the bar significantly by encouraging additional skills beyond traditional reading and arithmetic, it does not pinpoint the answer to addressing more basic employability issues such as interviewing, workplace accountability, and personal communication.

Businesses have not typically been engaged in working relationships with school districts, even when discussions are occurring around skills training and career options for students. While some businesses regularly attend career fairs, Summit participants expressed a feeling of futility when questioned further about these school events. Many Summit participants, both educators and business, alike, voiced support for the expectation that employers must reach out to potential employees by going into the schools to be a part of educating students. It was evident that businesses and schools were not talking sufficiently and that there was a real need for them to do so in the current environment.

The current disconnect between the sectors causes serious underlying frustration. As noted in the discussion, “How are kids passing math and science, but when they get to [my business], they know nothing?” While the comment may be somewhat of a generality, there is an understanding that today's workplace has become much more competitive. In an effort to prepare students for greater competition in a global workforce, schools are focusing less on vocational training and “soft” skills and more on scholastic achievement. Ironically, this leaves the majority of students – those students not attending a four-year university or college after high school – lacking vital workplace readiness.

One primary facet of this issue lies in the expectations that parents often have for their own children. Parents typically hope that their children will succeed and do better than themselves. A four-year degree has become the benchmark for success. When asked their thoughts, Summit participants were not unique to this American ideal. It will be difficult to make the philosophical transition that a two-year or skills training program can provide financial success. As noted by a Summit participant, “We have failed our students and kids [by advocating] that success in life is dependent on that four-year degree. I know a kid that trained for a single year and entered the workforce making \$41,000 a year. We struggle to offer new teachers \$30,000 to start.”

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To move forward to meet the needs of today's students and businesses will require a shared philosophy among educators and business. Coming together for the Summit with a goal to develop a Plan of Action to sustain communication among the two groups and begin to develop ways to address regional and local needs is a good start, but fulfilling the Plan will prove most critical for the region, state, and students and families who call Western Iowa home.

In four small group discussions, Summit participants began the conversation as a first-step in a long-term approach to growing a sustainable relationship among education and business leaders that, over time, will prepare students to better understand the 21st century work and career environment. Below is a summary list of the critical issues identified in small groups.

- There is a declining population in the region.
- A need to engage parents in communications regarding career opportunities and skills.
- Lack of communication between and among educators and businesses.
- The idea that both educators and business are concerned with “product quality” – educators are promoting quality students, while businesses are promoting a good product through the marketplace.
- There is a need for mutual understanding between business and education leaders regarding the regulations, standards, and needs from both sectors.
  - Businesses are seeking a “skilled workforce” which includes people skills, a good attitude, and appropriate training.
  - Educators are required to not only meet standards, but provide an appropriate educational environment for all students at all levels.
  - There are varied perceptions and misperceptions of each sector by the other.
  - There is a need to recognize that culture change is necessary.
- In the past two decades, vocations have been left behind with a greater emphasis on more advanced academics.
- Meeting the expectations of potential employers can be a challenge given the broader requirements for students.
- The newer generation of employees lack “soft skills” that are still required in the workplace.
- The traditional family has shifted in the last two generations and there are fewer safety nets available for workers.
- Wages are often low to respond to competition.
- Affordable housing is not available in many of the region’s communities.
- Daycare and transportation supports are difficult for many workers and also restrict the recruitment of workers for filling positions in local businesses.
- There is a migration of students to specialty careers and away from skilled positions such as welding, advanced manufacturing, and other jobs.

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- There is a need to give students some kind of work experience to help with their soft skills, as well as a need for students to receive basic writing and problem solving instruction.
- Students often have a very narrow view of what careers are available in the region; there must be avenues explored to expose students to a variety of careers.
- Liability insurance is often a barrier for businesses to bring students into the workplace. There need to be alternatives to on-the-job experiences.
- There is a need to be sure there is contextual learning of skills.
- Teachers are difficult to recruit in a number of specialties.
- Our values and what equates to “success” is measured traditionally in terms of four-year degrees and white collar-type careers.
- There is a lack of skilled workers such as plumbers, electricians, and building trades.
- There is too little focus on recruitment, education, and awareness about careers.
- There is a need for specialized job search mechanisms for some careers.
- It is difficult for schools to connect with businesses and job sites because of transportation and time constraints.
- Kids want to experience what is in metro areas.
- There are no connections with graduates from the region’s K-12 schools.
- There are time limitations in a school’s curriculum to schedule required courses, as well as other activities that may take students off school grounds.
- There are varied parenting skills – some students are not getting basic, good employability qualities modeled at home.
- Schools require students to take all core courses, limiting time and availability of vocational-technical experience.
- Vocational-technical programs are expensive.
- Coordinating and taking the time for faculty and trainers to take classes in the field is difficult.
- It will be essential to connect businesses and instructors; there is a lack of knowledge on how to do that.
- State and federal education mandates do not match with business needs.
- There is a lack of flexibility for both schools and businesses.
- In small school districts with low enrollments, it is more difficult to offer training.

## Current or Proposed Programs and Initiatives in the Region

Summit participants named a number of programs and initiatives as potential ideas or that are currently in place throughout the region. This list provides a base of programs and efforts that should be a part of the continued discussion between school and business leaders as they look to meeting the demands of the 21st century workplace.

- Job shadowing and internships
- Ride sharing
- Project Lead the Way- A national program forming partnerships among public schools, higher education institutions and the private sector to increase the quantity and quality of engineers and engineering technologists graduating from our education system.
- “Choices” for 8th Grade- Iowa Choices is designed to equip educational professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to assist students and families with career exploration and information, as well as knowledge about educational and financing opportunities.
- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for all students
- Equipment sharing
- School-to-work and other workplace preparedness programs
- Western Iowa Advantage (WIAD)
- League of Schools as gatherer of regional educator-business discussions
- Human Resource Groups (Business and Education Sectors)
- Chambers of Commerce Business Education
- Panel discussions with new educators
- Information pipeline between students and employers
- Working with community colleges to develop and implement programs

It is essential that businesses and educators work together to improve not only communication among themselves, but to better understand and appreciate the challenges and constraints that each sector faces. Each sector has different needs, different personal connections with our jobs, as well as different organizational cultures. There are significant territorial issues that will require each group to get to know the other. Without collaborative planning that addresses the needs and demands of students, the community and region, and area businesses, current community issues such as declining population and school enrollments will continue downward momentum.

## Summary of Small Group Reports

The small groups gathered for a reporting session and full group discussion.

Workforce issues cannot be separated from economic development and business. Recognizing this vital linkage, business leaders in eight Western Iowa counties have joined together to create Western Iowa Advantage (WIAD), an economic development marketing partnership. WIAD has created a website that includes a variety of regional economic development and workforce information and research. Also of concern to the region is the recruitment of people back to the region. Currently, WIAD is conducting a postcard campaign with Western Iowa residents who know people who have relocated to other areas. This campaign is a person-to-person effort to contact former Western Iowans who have moved away and invite them back to the region to work and enjoy the area's quality of life.

Communities are unique, but there often are commonalities among them. The lack of communication between employers, employees, parents, and schools is a major challenge to addressing the region's workforce shortage skills. It is important for employers to understand the standards mandated of schools and the expectations of school districts. Bringing employers into the schools and into discussions would be helpful.

Like the rest of Iowa, the region is aging and more people are retiring. Most regions are losing population, and the state is experiencing a net loss of graduates from Iowa's schools. Compared to more urban areas, pay disparity and lack of promotion for quality jobs are an issue for young people in the region. Iowa has one of the highest rates of two-working parent households in the country, and lack of childcare and other services are major issues for working families.

For many families, the expectation for many students is to graduate from a four-year university or college. While many enroll immediately after high school, a large percentage of students do not complete the requirements for a Bachelor's degree. Increased recognition in the community of the value of vocational and entrepreneurial training would help drive a shift in attitude and improve the awareness for curriculum additions. Time and the availability of teachers focused on business and jobs skill curriculum are challenges, and coupled with state and federal mandates, it is difficult to be as flexible as is often required.

Educators at all levels need to be a part of the discussion. Business owners, managers, and human resource directors are also important if these sectors are to link together to make changes. Even the business sectors face challenges in understanding the unique needs of such diverse industries as manufacturing, services, energy, and technology, among others in the region. As this process moves forward, it may be worthwhile to conduct resource mapping in communities to better understand what is available and areas where gaps may exist.

There is agreement that soft skills training is important wherever a student may go to work regardless of education level required. This will mean a greater connection between school and the world of work. Much of the change will happen based on the demand in the community of parents, businesses, and community leaders. There may be a need to restructure what the school system looks like and how it delivers services. This will require communities to come together to better understand each other and perhaps create innovative models for change.

## Developing Shared Strategies

Summit participants reconvened in small groups to identify potential strategies to address the many issues identified in the previous small group discussions. The following is a compilation of those suggested strategies.

- Conduct the necessary assessment and research to address issues.
- Identify key students for targeted follow-up and support.
- Develop skills competencies as a way to conduct targeted support and follow-up with students interested in new skills training.
- Bring business leaders, owners, and employees into the classroom to share with students – use parents as one way to do that.
- Educate teachers and administrators through in-service days about careers and current career opportunities for students.
- Keep line of communication open between economic developers, educators, and businesses.
- Create ways to better share information between sectors and individual businesses and school districts.
- Communicate directly with teachers – businesses should establish personal connections.
- Map available resources to include time, space, current programs, funding, resources, etc.
- Involve educators in existing business planning groups.
- Involve students and parents in discussion, as well.
- Use appropriate “portals” for communication and education – ie. the WIAD website as a link for employers, educators, and students.
- Look into ways to make career fairs more interesting and effective – use alumni as a connector to students.
- Conduct career expos where kids connect with people in the field.
- Conduct career field trips in cooperation with businesses.
- Create mentoring programs between business leaders, employees, and students.
- Use all current and available opportunities to connect with students.
- Develop career exploration opportunities to allow students to be introduced to different kinds of careers.
- Teach 21st century skills in schools and bring businesses into the curriculum.
- Conduct face-to-face meetings and public outreach in the community to discuss issues with parents and others interested.
- Focus on health care careers.
- Provide internships for teachers.
- Provide experiential, on-the-job learning to students.
- Promote the quality of jobs available in the region.

- Provide information to high school graduates regarding local opportunities that include jobs, quality of life, and the progress of communities and the region.
- Businesses should recruit in schools like the Armed Forces.
- Develop a broad public education initiative that is shared; provide materials, public input, and exposure to various careers.
- Create internships that place students with participating businesses; include work/credit programs, summer courses through work, and summer employment, which may include hiring a coordinator for these specialized shared programs.
- Identify resources to support employer-education shared initiatives.
- Use the strength and resources of the area community colleges located within the region.
- Engage middle school students in career exploration programs to include structured classroom activities, visits to businesses and manufacturers, and other employers.
- Involve parents in development of programs and in public discussion and education of community.
- Connect to existing youth leadership groups such as FFA, 4-H, faith-based groups, etc.
- Assist teachers in integrating materials into curriculum.
- Establish leadership teams in the community to come up with a strategic plan.

## Developing a Plan of Work

There is unanimous agreement that there is much to do to begin to address the region's skilled workforce shortage. The issues and strategies identified in the Summit discussions provide a framework to begin initial activities. To move forward will require identifying activities, a timeline (short versus long-term activities), and those responsible to lead the effort. Sustaining the discussion will be difficult. It will require time and a commitment from leadership within both sectors. WIAD provides a venue to facilitate the ongoing efforts.

While it is advantageous to approach these efforts as a region, it is also suggested that within each school district and the greater community, business and education leaders should come together to continue the discussion and develop a plan that will move the broader issues forward within their respective communities. Most of the work will happen at this local level. Without a localized demand for change, it will be especially difficult for the school district to stray from its current programs. Businesses also need to understand that schools have limited resources and their own teachers and employers need to be a part of the discussion, as well. Above all, the involvement of local parents will be most critical.

The subsequent Plan of Action was developed in response to Summit participants' discussions and suggestions. There was consensus that employers and educators should continue working together to ensure that work motivated by Summit discussions continues. WIAD, which will engage educational leadership from the region, will lead the effort to implement the Plan of Action.

**Employer – Educator Plan of Action**  
**October 1, 2008 – September 30, 2009**

Activity	Who's Responsible			Deadline	Expected Results
	Region (WIAD)	Business	Education		
Formalize planning by expanding WIAD planning group to include an equal number of educators and businesses				November 1, 2008	Creating an inclusive planning group.
Create materials and include on WIAD website – create a Employer-Educator presence				November 1, 2008	Web site presence and easy access
Gather DVD's and other materials that demonstrate job availability for the region - disseminate				November 1, 2008	Provide materials to schools and students
At the school district, local, or county level, formulate a specific plan to address issues in the next year				December 31, 2008	Local plans of action and a plan to execute work.
Develop materials to market current and future job opportunities in the schools				February 1, 2009	Materials made available
Identify and develop skill demands in the regions; clearly let educators know what is needed now and over time; develop priorities				March 31, 2009	Skills and careers needed in region
Assess what programs are now in place and what is available				April 15, 2009	Data base and program models available
Convene Summit II – to evaluate and move forward				September 30, 2009	Assessment and plan for 2009-2010
Look for additional sources of funds that will support plan and effort				Ongoing	Program funding
Expand business interest and participation in this effort – recruit more businesses to participate				Ongoing	More businesses involved in longer-term
Engage in planning process at the regional and local levels – make time commitment				Ongoing	Sustaining effort
At the local school district level and in regional meetings, include this issue on the agenda and as a part of discussions				Ongoing	Heightened awareness and incremental systems change
Create or strengthen programs and seek out resources that are necessary				Ongoing	Developing model programs
Introduce issues within school districts in meetings/sessions with teachers, guidance counselors				Ongoing	Heightened awareness and inclusion
Sustain a regional group that comes together and works together to address shared issues and concerns				Ongoing	Creation of planning group and plan of action
Engage the Community Colleges and their expertise and resources				Ongoing	Experience in programs and technical assistance and support at all levels
Use resources from respective sectors that will support the effort; for example, alumni data for recruitment back to the region				Ongoing	Recruit and retain population and strengthen economy

## Summit Registrants

The following business and education leaders registered for the Summit.

- Brandy Andrews, Farmland Foods
- Brent Baumhover, American Home Shield
- Cali Beals, Iowa Department of Economic Development
- Joe Behrens, Region XII COG
- Shelly Blunk, Iowa Central Community College
- Marion Burns, MidAmerican Energy
- Mark Cautin, Guthrie County Hospital
- Claire Celsi, Integer Midwest
- Tom Christensen, Jefferson Scranton Community School District
- Jim Cooney, VT Industries, Inc.
- Rob Cordes, Carroll Community School District
- Dane Dammen, Thermal Fab
- Mike Fastenau, Black Hills Energy
- Ann Fitzpatrick, American Home Shield
- Rita Frahm, Ida County Economic Development
- Russ Freeman, Battle Creek Ida Grove Schools
- Brett Gibbs, Audubon Community Schools
- Jim Gossett, Carroll Area Development Corporation
- Tim Greene, Quality Machine of Iowa, Inc.
- Marty Greenlee, Goodrich - Engine Components Division
- Susan Hardy, Western Iowa Tech Community College
- Rick Hunsaker, Region XII COG
- Larry Islom, Power Lift
- Rachel Judisch, Generation Iowa Commission
- Mike Kethcam, Loring Hospital
- Kirby Klinge, Kitchen Solutions
- Barb Kruthoff, East Sac County Schools
- Dave Kwikkel, Schaller-Crestland School
- Katie Lawler, Carroll Area Development Corporation
- Angie Lawson, Western Iowa Tech Community College

- Don Luensmann, Chamber & Development Corporation of Crawford County
- Bill McAnally, Iowa Central Community College
- Marlene McComas, Iowa Central Community College
- Penny Miller, Kuemper Catholic School System
- John Millhollin, Panorama Community Schools
- Tom Nielsen, Audubon County Economic Development Corporation
- Jeff Ogren, Midwest Industries, Inc.
- Daryl Olsen, AMVC Management Services
- Jason Owen, Accu-Steel Inc.
- Mike Pardun, Denison Community Schools
- Shirley Phillips, Sac Economic & Tourism Development
- Dr. Harold Post, Galva Holstein Schools
- Dave Quandt, American Home Shield
- Barb Quandt, West Central
- Denise Ratham, Western Iowa Tech Community College
- Mark Rinehardt, CCMH
- Gloria Rodriguez, IBP/Tyson
- Roger Schmiedeskamp, IKM-Manning
- Steve Schulz, DMACC-Carroll Campus
- Steve Smith, Adair-Casey Community School District
- Kay Snyder, Iowa Department of Economic Development
- Jennifer Soll, Park View Care Center
- Rich Stoffers, Coon Rapids-Bayard Community Schools
- Julie Stoik, Western Iowa Tech Community College
- Dani Trimble, Odebolt Arthur Community School
- Rollie Wiebers, Charter Oak-Ute Schools
- Lori Wirtz, Iowa Workforce Development
- Kathy Schmidt, Iowa State University Extension



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State Public Policy Group, Inc. facilitated the Employer-Educator Summit.