

Re: Final report, Joint Task Force for Career Education Opportunities

From: Ramona Hattendorf, governor appointee

August 5, 2014

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First, thank you, legislative and agency staff members who have supported this work (you guys are awesome), and thank you fellow task force members for your insight and professional commitment to the youth of Washington state.

As the only member not affiliated with the legislature or a government agency I have tried to focus my filter on the family and community aspect of this, and on the cohesiveness with other work in the K-12 field. Like all of you, I am also a participant in the education system. In my case, as a parent and as a longtime volunteer in the areas of improving family-school partnerships and working toward equitable education.

Regarding comments in the draft report:

I disagree with the premise in this statement:

- *“Some families, including families of ELL students, don't always realize that the student has control over their educational pathway.” (page 5, under Career and College Ready Requirements)*

While I think many believe that should be the goal, there is no evidence to suggest it is a reality. Access to courses is arbitrary. For instance, districts routinely ration access to courses such as advanced math and science; even when students “test in” or pass requirements, they may not get access. And students in special education may be required to take certain study skill classes, even when there is disagreement about their necessity or value and even when it interferes in their ability to take electives that align to their interests and career goals.

District choices and protocol largely control the direction, quality and quantity of education, and input of students and families can be marginal. Saying students have control over their pathway is aspirational, at best.

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Regarding task force recommendations, there are 2 areas that I think need to be better addressed: Family engagement and standards for career education (that is the counseling and exploratory aspect of this work, not the rigor of individual CTE courses.)

FOCUS: Family engagement; building capacity to partner with families and community

ADDRESSES: Access to relevant career- and college-ready diploma; awareness of multiple education and career pathways; insight and feedback for enhancing and supporting work-integrated learning opportunities; insight and feedback for improved CTE in MS, HS and skill centers

Family engagement is noticeably absent in CTE priority recommendations, and in recent legislative decisions around flexibility in high school requirements.

Our schools and government agencies are operating with insufficient information about and sensitivity to the barriers that so many of our students face. You see this with the startling unfamiliarity of families and community members with pre-requisites for certain fields of study, or the variety of career opportunities available to our youth, or the general unfamiliarity with how high schools prepare teens to transition into post-secondary pursuits. You also see this in the system's inability to address the fallout from issues like broken discipline policies and inadequate, tiered supports for students with academic and behavior challenges.

While the latter don't fall under purview of this task force, they feed into the gaps that affect career readiness and will influence the efficacy of actions and investments that this group recommends. Family engagement is an important component of closing those opportunity gaps and needs to be incorporated into all aspects of education, P-20. It is also essential to community building, outreach and successful communication – all areas of concern for advancing the concept of multiple pathways. Family engagement is also a very effective tool in program design.

Families have great insight into what their children need, and valuable feedback for educators, policy makers and system administrators. Families are also the one consistency in children's lives, birth to adulthood. If you don't take family needs and feedback into consideration you can derail good work. Consider:

- The recent legislative and rulemaking struggles over course flexibility and high school graduation requirements, in particular, highlight a schism between school districts and many in the Hispanic, African-American, immigrant and disabled communities. The trust that "flexibility" will be used responsibly is near zero in some cases. This mistrust can go back generations and directly affects home-school communications around career opportunities. There is well-documented disproportionality that feeds this mistrust and strong evidence that kids of a certain profile are not given the same academic opportunities -- and indeed face additional systemic barriers because of breakdowns in communication, interventions and supports. A review of cases at the state's education ombudsman office will give you an idea of struggles parents face in supporting their children in the K-12 schools. Any work in career education has to understand and be able to accommodate this history of strained relations.
- The one-sided testimony from counselors and school officials to this task force about lack of connections to families is a heart-breaking example of education professionals not having the skills and resources for effective, productive outreach to families, let alone ability to partner with them. For most youth, families are their primary support system, birth through adulthood. A system that views parents as an obstacle to work around, or that inadvertently makes it more difficult for parents to support their child, ultimately fails the students and will limit the success of career planning and transitions. Current practices around the High School and Beyond Plan are ineffective when it comes to engaging families and helping them better support their child's career aspirations.

Schools and policy makers assume knowledge and engagement where there is little or none.

Decisions are made assuming a quality and volume of counseling that is simply not in practice in many schools. Embracing families as partners helps kids, helps communities, is low cost and supplements the work of professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Funding for family engagement coordinators extended beyond K-5
- Funding for career coordinators to liaison between school districts and the workforce groups to foster opportunities such as internships and other work-integrated learning, and to support the work of career guidance in the schools
- Facilitation to build partnerships between community groups, workforce groups and families to support youth in their teen to early adulthood transition years. Alliances between those in technical fields and groups working on afterschool youth development and extended learning opportunities could be especially beneficial, especially where schools are not yet equipped for robust career education and family engagement
- Funding for professional development to increase capacity for family engagement and career counseling
- Statewide adoption of family engagement standards, and recognized mechanisms to measure its success
- Guidance and clarity around the High School and Beyond Plan: What does a quality partnership look like? How can we include basic family education about high school course selection and requirements of various career pathways, and to what extent can we do this at the state level to relieve pressure on local school districts? Could the state hire consultants to identify tools and resources that districts would find most beneficial?

FOCUS: Standards for career education in middle school and high school

***ADDRESSES:** Expanding career education and career exploration and planning into middle school; options for increasing student and parent awareness of the multiple education and career pathways available for students; strategies for enhancing and supporting work-integrated learning opportunities for students*

Schools incorporate career education – that is counseling, career planning and course selection -- in a variety of ways. But while they need continued flexibility in *how* they allocate resources and instructional time, there needs to be a shared expectation that they *will* incorporate it, and that local and state funding will be available to accommodate it.

Creating shared standards for career education will give schools, families and communities a common understanding of expectations and goals, and will help inform professional development. They could also help inform a grants process for program implementation and expansion.

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Again, thanks so much for everyone's time and commitment to this work.

All the best,

Ramona Hattendorf, governor appointee, Career Education Opportunities