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ABSTRACT

The time has come to start to improve students' job experiences and to improve the relationship between the work and school experiences. In rural and agricultural economies, student work was so important to the family that the school year was fashioned to accommodate it. As the nation became more urban, student employment for pay and student employment in family business replaced agricultural work. The fast food industry provided new opportunities for students to earn through part-time employment. At present, there is general separation between the student's world of school and the world of part-time employment. The total separation between part-time work and the classroom can be improved, although it cannot be made ideal. Experience-based education can be enhanced if schools know where the students work and what they do, and employers learn how their students are doing in school. Communication between employers and the school about the educational progress of student workers would help link the school and work processes to ensure that students got the most benefit from both. With cooperation between schools and businesses, student employment could become a contributor to youth development. (SLD)

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# A Perspective on Student Employment

by Paul E. Barton

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Paul E. Barton

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## STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

By Paul E. Barton

This Policy Information Perspective suggests that the time has come to start to improve students' job experiences and to better relate the work and school experiences. It starts with some background on student employment, suggests some goals we could strive for, and describes some emerging activities that are related.

### THE DEVELOPING STUDENT WORKFORCE

There was a time when student work was so critical to the family and economy that the school year was fashioned to accommodate it. Planting and harvesting took precedence. In the rural economy, it was common for students to work part time, but without the employment surveys we have today that work went unrecorded. And if such surveys had existed, they probably would not have recorded the young rural student's typical activities—feeding chickens, milking cows, washing clothes in kettles over open fires, and fixing breakfast for the men before they went to work in the fields.

Even as we became more urban, part-time employment opportunities (paid employment) were modest: the paper route, babysitting, mowing neighborhood lawns, or perhaps soda jerking at a neighborhood drug store soda fountain. There were just a handful of such jobs in an entire neighborhood.

At the same time, the landscape was dotted with small family businesses: the corner grocery, the bakery, and the hardware store. The family's children grew up in these stores, worked in them, and may have lived in the rooms above them. When we look back on this we think not so much of the hours that should have been devoted to homework, but how these hard-working parents often vaulted their children, through education, into the middle class and the professions. Ethnic groups, such as members of the Jewish community, used family-owned businesses as a springboard for their children's careers. The scarcity of such entrepreneurship in the urban Black community has been a recognized handicap in that regard.

A new era dawned in the prosperity that our country enjoyed during and after World War II. As a service to wartime workers, department stores learned to keep irregular workhours. The five-and-dime and its lunch counter, in a period of severe

labor shortages, turned to younger workers. Service industries began their steady climb to overtake manufacturing, often with workhours accommodating part-time employment.

In the 1950s, the McDonald brothers converted the well-known drive-in restaurant into a place where hungry folks could go inside to get their food quickly, and Ray Kroc's Golden Arches sprang up across the countryside. In a traveling America, Holiday Inns and their imitators offered thousands of low-skill job opportunities. Later, self-service gas stations continued to create low-skill opportunities—just about anyone could make change.

In some symbiotic fashion, the million babies born in the first year after the war, who became teenagers in the late 1950s, complemented this booming food and service industry. More high school students began working part time, a trend that was to continue at least until the depression of the early 1980s. I watched these developments closely, writing in 1974 that “the teenage labor force is increasingly—and will soon be largely—an in-school labor force. . . . The time is coming when teenage employment and unemployment will for the most part be identified with the schooling period of life, rather than reflecting the movement from school and entry into adulthood, as in times past.”<sup>1</sup>

This burgeoning “youth labor market,” as I came to call it, was little commented on. The first (and only) comprehensive study of what the experience in fast-food chains meant to youth was made in 1984 by the National Institute for Work and Learning. The perceptions were generally positive:

Nine out of ten feel that their job taught them the skills associated with food preparations—almost half learned supervisory skills, and four out of ten learned inventory control. . . .

Fast-food employees also learn other employability skills—dealing with customers; taking directions; getting along with co-workers; being on time; being dependable; being well groomed. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Barton, “Youth Unemployment and Career Entry,” in *Labor Market Information For Youth*, Seymour Wolfbein, editor, Temple University, 1975.

Moreover, younger employees, minority employees, lower socioeconomic background employees, less schooled employees, all seemed to get more out of these jobs than others."<sup>2</sup>

### GROWING INTEREST IN USING THE WORKSITE

Cornell researcher Stephen Hamilton, specializing broadly in youth development, began to look at this work experience and its role in the coming-of-age. Meanwhile, others began questioning whether such part-time work was harming schoolwork, and stories about its harmful effects appeared regularly in the press, and continue to do so. The genesis of these stories was a small study that looked at a couple of hundred Orange County, California, sophomores in their first jobs. Yet, there were many larger studies—statewide and nationwide—that mostly found such work benign in terms of school achievement, at least until the number of hours worked per week passed 20. At a time when stories about the decline of education in America drove out almost all news that didn't fit this story line, these studies went largely unreported. My own survey of previous research, coupled with an examination of data from the much respected National Assessment of Educational Progress, was well reported, but the education press continued to refer to the ill effects; such had become common knowledge, not to be dislodged.<sup>3</sup> The table below shows the results in five subject areas.

Reviewing the student work situation again in 1990, in a Policy Information Center publication, and how many students were both working and schooling, we observed that these "education and employment institutions are in two separate worlds—taking little or no advantage of this shared involvement with students in this critical period in their growth and development." By the 1992 school year, 68 percent of high school seniors were working. Half of them were working in food service, as grocery clerks or cashiers, or as salespersons.

While this vast youth labor market and student employment was evolving, my own interest in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and that of a number of my colleagues,

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in *Skills, Standards and Entry-Level Work*, Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, 1995.

<sup>3</sup>*Earning and Learning: The Academic Achievement of High School Juniors With Jobs*, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ, 1989.



was in what could be done to create more planned "worksite" experiences as part of the education system and as part of a comprehensive effort to improve the transition from school to work. Our diagnosis was that school was too isolated from the workplace. We thought that we could build on the U.S. experience with apprenticeship, cooperative education, some small-scale internship, and a large experiment with experience-based career education (EBCE)<sup>4</sup> to achieve large-scale use of the worksite on a planned basis. For most of the 1980s, however, the government, foundations, policy analysts, and policymakers concentrated on "at-risk" youth, and means-tested approaches to employment and training; there was little interest in system reform generally.

<b>Average Proficiency for 11th Graders, by Hours Worked*, 1986</b>					
<b>Hours Worked</b>	<b>Mathematics</b>	<b>Science</b>	<b>History</b>	<b>Literature</b>	<b>Reading</b>
None	307	292	288	289	57
Less than 6	309	299	292	291	58
6 - 10	307	296	287	288	57
11 - 15	309	299	291	290	58
16 - 20	308	297	289	289	57
21 - 25	303	293	281	281	55
26 - 30	299	285	276	277	54

Source: *Earning and Learning: The Academic Achievement of High School Juniors With Jobs*, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service, 1989, Table 1, p. 16.  
 \* The proficiency scales for mathematics, history, literature, and science range from 0 to 500, while the reading scale ranges from 0 to 100.

The 1990s (but beginning in the late 1980s) has seen a surge of interest both in the planned use of the worksite in education and training and in improving the school-to-work transition generally, under a combination of federal legislation and state action. It has seen dozens of youth apprenticeship demonstration programs and some refurbished cooperative education. Everyone recognizes that it will be hard to gain the

<sup>4</sup>EBCE was a federal initiative with numerous favorable evaluations, operating in more than 200 sites. It faded after federal involvement ceased in the early 1980s.

kind and quantity of employer participation necessary to achieve the ambitious goals that have been set, even with the support given by major employer organizations.

My own term for using the worksite in this planned manner has been "experience-based education," emphasizing the "experience" over the work alone, and stressing that it is a part of education, not just job-skill training (the more general terms are "work-based learning" or "youth apprenticeship"). I have argued elsewhere that there are different levels of use of the worksite and have discussed how the other elements of the school-to-work transition relate to these uses.<sup>5</sup> However, all of these levels have involved a joint effort by schools and employers in using the worksite in tandem with the school classroom. I believe this should remain the principal focus of school-to-work programs. This is necessary if we are to build a surer transition and raise educational achievement (matters argued elsewhere, and by a growing number of people).

#### GOALS FOR STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

I do not, however, believe this means we should ignore all this unplanned part-time work by students. It is true that these casual youth jobs are not usually the experience and learning opportunities we want as an integral part of an education program. The training and skill content is usually relatively low, and the amount of training required is minimal. Worksite opportunities should give youth a leg up in the primary or adult labor market. But we should recognize that it will take a long, uphill struggle to get these in sufficient quantity. In the meantime, we should take full advantage of the opportunity we have. We don't need to accept this total separation between part-time work and the classroom; the situation can be improved, if not made ideal.

As we pursue such a possibility, we should in no way relax the efforts to get complete experience-based education. We should not focus on improving the experience in regular part-time employment in despair of getting something better. And we should recognize that we can likely make only modest improvements: the constraints are real and considerable.

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Barton, "Memorandum on the School to Work Transition," in *Improving the Transition from School to Work in the United States*, American Youth Policy Forum, et al. 1993.

Our goals might be:

1. Schools would know the extent to which each of its students was working and where, who the employer is, and the kind of work students are doing.  
The most basic way to start is for education to consider it important that students are working. This attitude can be signaled to students and parents by making student employment a part of school records. This would also be a positive step on the employment side: employers would soon learn that the schools care and that student employment is a matter of record.
2. Employers would know how each of their student employees is doing at school.  
To know is a beginning step in caring about how well students are doing, and a precondition for almost anything else. To ask prospective and current employees is itself a signal that school achievement matters. (John Bishop has argued effectively that such "signals" are key to raising school achievement). Setting grade and attendance standards for their student employees would be even better.
3. Employers and schools would be in communication about the educational progress of individual students.  
Schools would be encouraged to communicate with employers about students having difficulty with school work (with appropriate permissions and respect for confidentiality). Similarly, employers would be encouraged to advise schools of educational deficiencies they see that can be corrected at school.
4. In a collaborative approach among employers, employer organizations, state departments of education, trade associations, individual schools, and perhaps the Skill Standards Board, student employees would be helped in getting the most possible from these employment experiences.

While the skill content of any specific youth job of this type is likely low, each establishment in which students work is a complete business and therefore a learning opportunity. Special efforts could be made to help student employees learn about the various aspects of that business. Given that a student probably has several such jobs during high school and in the summers, this could add up to significant experience and knowledge. It would help, for example, if there was a conscious effort at job rotation to assure that youth experience as many functions at the worksite as possible.

A fast-food chain establishment, for example, requires inventory control, bookkeeping, ordering of supplies, and payroll preparation. More than 15 years ago, Archie Lapointe advanced the idea that workbooks be prepared to help employees learn something about each of these functions. This could be combined with "job shadowing," to let student employees observe the work being done, and perhaps participation in the actual work on some learning basis. Schools could also make an effort to complement these experiences.

Beyond these business functions, there is the opportunity to learn the "soft" skills that are more generic to any employment. For example:

- taking responsibility
- presenting a positive attitude
- working well with co-workers
- listening to instructions

More systematic efforts could be made to see that such work behaviors were learned and recorded in such systems as Worklink®, Career Passports, or the emerging Certificates of Initial Mastery. And employers could be involved in helping to assess and document skill acquisition.

More generally, adult workers could function as coaches and mentors in teaching work skills and providing information about careers. Employers and adult workers could help youth see career advancement patterns that exist in industries that employ a large number of youth. For example, in the fast-food industry, there is a tremendous infrastructure of skilled and professional workers that support those industries that most youth who work in them do not comprehend.

These are broad goals. Achieving any one would likely be an improvement. They are general targets designed to initiate thinking about how part-time student employment can more surely contribute to youth development. They do not constitute a "program." Such would have to emerge from the institutions and organizations listed under goal 4 above.

It is a fair question to ask whether employers would be interested in participating in such efforts. Their interest is in running a business, not the education of teenage students. But fast-food chains have long been looking for ways to serve the community, such as in McDonald's Ronald McDonald House.<sup>6</sup> These businesses draw their own more experienced supervisors and managers from this student labor supply, so they have a self-interest in its quality. Also, employers of young people know that they—and their families to be—are their future customers; they want to achieve goodwill in their workforce and among the parents of their young workers.

Over the past couple of decades these large employers of students have become sensitized to the public interest in, and scrutiny of, student labor. The press continues to publish stories about ill effects of such teenage work, and there is even legislative action in some states to limit it. This has made employers recognize the value of improving the image of these important employment arrangements and how doing so will help their businesses.

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<sup>6</sup>McDonald's has initiated a youth apprenticeship program in several large cities for employees from some of the poorest neighborhoods. It includes scholarship support for higher education and culminates in managerial positions

## RELATED EFFORTS

While I am not aware of organized efforts to accomplish what is described above for student workers as part of school-to-work programs, there are related efforts underway that may overlap.

In Work Plus, a demonstration effort by Public Private Ventures in Philadelphia, there is a goal of upgrading work of youth in the secondary labor market (what I call the youth labor market), not limited to students. A number of possibilities for exploration are laid out in *Skills, Standards, and Entry-Level Work*, prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor by Public Private Ventures. For anyone interested in the possibilities, that document would bear reading in the entirety.

At this time, the goals of Work Plus are generally more ambitious than the modest ones stated above, with an objective of making youth jobs more developmentally effective. This is done through (a) enlarging the job itself and recording the skills acquired, (b) providing counseling and training at the project's headquarters, and (c) helping youth "move around" among jobs to get a better sequencing of experiences. Work Plus is now in a start-up phase in three sites; four more have been selected.

The National Center for Research on Vocational Education (NCRVE) has a project on high-performance learning for adolescents in retail and food service industries and is now (as of November 1995) selecting sites for it. The center states that:

While high skill and high wage workplaces are the desired future and training setting for all youth, the simple fact is that there are insufficient numbers of them available in today's job market. More likely, adolescents and young adults will be channeled into the "youth labor market," which is comprised of retail and fast-food industry jobs. These jobs are considered low skill, with little opportunity for "high performance" learning. The issue is, what can be done to enhance the educational content of jobs that young people have already or will most likely obtain?

The NCRVE project is designed to examine the extent to which restructuring the workplace contributes to academic performance, work performance, and related attitudes of youth. NCRVE expects to have a quasi-experimental design with control workplaces where no changes will be made. Different changes will be made in different experimental sites. The interventions are expected to include different approaches at

different sites, adult mentors, a “favorite teacher” strategy, parent involvement, a parent/school/work triad, pay-for-learning incentives, other incentive strategies, and paid time for homework.

This is obviously an ambitious undertaking but should add to our knowledge if undertaken and successfully completed. It will take a long time to get results.

I am also told that some schools offering cooperative education have become hard-pressed to supply arranged work experiences and are trying to build on the jobs students find themselves. An example is a new approach at LaGuardia Community College, called the Integrative Seminar.

Reaching back 15 years to experience-based career education, described above, there were a number of techniques used to help get more out of work experience. An example is the use of student-kept journals to record job experiences.

It is very likely that employers somewhere have taken steps on their own initiative. At the Bikeworld, a small bicycle shop in Paducah, Kentucky, the owners require student workers to maintain at least a C average, saying, “We had real reservations about school and work and as we thought about what we’d want for our own child we didn’t want work to interfere with school or extracurricular activities.” They also will schedule work hours to make it more convenient for students.<sup>7</sup>

There are likely many more employers who would feel the same way as this bike shop in Paducah.

\* \* \*

There is enough momentum at federal, state, and local community levels in improving education and the transition from school to work that it is reasonable to suppose that a considerable number of employers—working with the school—would be willing to take the lead in increasing the contribution that student employment can make to youth development, the creation of more capable workers, and educational achievement. It could be brought about under efforts of the School to Work Transition Act, through business organizations, school systems, and local business—school partnerships.

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<sup>7</sup>Marilyn Bailey, the Prichard Committee, in an article in the *Paducah Sun*, November, 1993.