



HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Charter School Helps Train Tomorrow's Workforce

It's a near-unanimous sentiment these days: our schools are failing to produce qualified workers. Employers especially lament the lack of quality applicants for high-tech jobs in emerging industries.

How can schools step up to fill this critical need? With increased competition from overseas, how can the U.S. educational system prepare young people for the next generation's world economy?

Charter schools--independent public schools run by autonomous non-profits, rather than local districts—are providing innovative and fresh approaches to this challenge. One of them, Career Connections Charter High School in Lawrenceville, offers a window on how these schools are helping to reshape tomorrow's workforce.

Career Connections was created 10 years ago by the Boys & Girls Club of Western Pennsylvania. Its name spells out its mission: to help all students succeed in the workforce. Career Connections recognizes that not all students want to go on to college and works from the premise that, if they don't, they should still be on a path that will lead them to a good-paying job.

"The founders of this school had a vision to make sure there was a place for every kind of child in a public school," says Brian White, Sr., the school director.

The school's innovative curriculum includes, along with a full academic slate, courses designed to prepare students for the world of work. "Career classes" teach skills like workplace etiquette, dealing with customers and clients, and interviewing for a job. Even the most basic of interpersonal skills—like

making eye contact when you speak—can be invaluable for these students, nearly three-quarters of whom come from low-income families.

"If these interventions don't take place," White says, "the students probably won't learn these lessons until they're in their early 20s."

Students form bonds with mentors from local businesses. Some run their own businesses through the Boys & Girls Club's Youth Enterprise Zone. During their senior year, students can take an internship at a local business or non-profit, pursue college-level courses, or enter a pre-apprenticeship program in the building trades **through Renaissance III 2000, which links trainees with trade unions.** After high school (the school's graduation rate is 89 percent), the vast majority of students go to college or trade school, or get hired directly into a job, some of them in businesses where they interned.

In a region like Pittsburgh's, with an aging population and burgeoning high-tech sector, a school like Career Connections makes perfect sense. "With our demographics in Western Pennsylvania," says White, "there aren't enough people here ready to move into the vacancies that will be created in some high-paying, skilled job sectors."

So how do we compete in tomorrow's economy? If we take our cue from successful schools like Career Connections, we will encourage innovation, not just in the products we make or sell, but in how we educate our young people.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



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