



SHOP TALK # 29:

Central Texas Workforce Education Summit

Central Texas held its first regional Workforce Education Summit September 15 -16 in Austin, Texas, at Goodwill Industries. The summit was sponsored by the Literacy Coalition of Central Texas, Workforce Solutions / Capital Area Workforce Board, and Workforce Solutions / Rural Capital Area. Participants from five counties attended the summit.

Preceding the summit, the Literacy Coalition conducted a regional employers' needs survey. Industry sectors participating in the survey included manufacturers; professional and technical services; retail trade, including grocery stores; health care providers; and information technology. Employers responded with the following information regarding prospective workers:

- 56% lack the necessary English language and literacy skills
- 50% demonstrate a lack of "soft skills" or work readiness skills
- 50% lack technical skills to monitor or operate equipment
- 43% of native speakers of English lack basic education / literacy skills

Seventy-six percent of the employers also indicated a need for training for incumbent workers in four areas: "soft" or work readiness skills; English language literacy skills; technical skills; and basic literacy skills for native speakers of English. Seventy-six percent indicated they were willing to invest in classes during work hours, and 60% were willing to pay a fee for services. Only 4% were interested or able to provide childcare for employees participating in classes, and only 8% would consider providing or paying for transportation to classes held offsite. All employers stressed the need for employees to have good communication skills in order to interact effectively with customers.

One of the highlights of the summit was the participation by local employers who support site-based workforce literacy initiatives: H-E-B, Seton Hospitals, Whataburger, Guero's, and Priority Retail Outlets. Employer panelists focused their remarks on the benefits and challenges of providing basic education/literacy skills instruction for their employees. All employers emphasized the need to invest in human capital to maximize a return on investment.

- H-E-B has found success using an electronic take-home instructional kit, *Sed de Saber*, especially with night shift employees whose work hours prevent them from attending evening community classes; the supermarket chain also underwrites continuing education for those who wish to further their studies.
- Bastrop's two Whataburger locations promote from within whenever possible and have invested in literacy services for their employees. Employees have become a community of learners, with peers mentoring and supporting one another; they include high school graduates as well as adults needing to upgrade their basic literacy and language skills. The local literacy council provides instruction.
- Seton Hospitals offer literacy and English language instruction for employees in environmental services. With over 10,000 employees in Central Texas, Seton is interested in seeing its employees benefit from cultural competence and inclusion within the work community. Now offering its third round of instruction, Seton is enjoying a reduction in attrition among this employee population, a number of



whom have continued their studies in GED preparation and citizenship. English at Work, a community-based organization, is the literacy provider.

- English at Work also provides services to employees of Guero's, a well known south Austin restaurant. The results are more opportunities for internal promotions and improved safety on the job. *Sed de Saber* is also used for supplemental instruction.
- Priority Retail and Community Action, Inc. (CAI) partnered to prepare emerging workers for employment in retail sales (*ESL Goes to the Mall*) with an eleven-week program that included mentoring and unpaid internships. CAI recruited participants from existing ESL classes and Even Start programs, and Priority Retail recruited retail business partners at an outlet mall. Additional employer partners included a local book store, public library, and health clinic. Support services (childcare, transportation, mentoring) were critical to the initiative's success.

The conference also featured speed networking opportunities, break-out sessions on planning strategic partnerships, identifying collaborative needs, creating action plans, funding opportunities, and priorities for work-based education programs. Featured speakers included Joanie Rethlake (*The Role of Texas LEARNS and the State Adult Basic Education System in Workforce Education: A Rider 82 Update*). Dr. Heide Spruck-Wrigley presented *What Works in Worker Training: Lessons From the Field*, ending the two-day summit with practical instructional strategies. Dr. Wrigley identified initiatives that have successfully integrated adult literacy with demand occupational training and a pipeline of opportunities for adults. All of the programs have the following features in common:

- They assess for motivation; there's a trial period to ensure that there is a match between program and participant.
- There is a support system that recognizes the "turbulence factors" in many adult learners' lives.
- They provide integrated, certificate-focused education that is hands on or competency-based.
- They allow "time to learn", recognizing the variables among learners' needs.
- They include job development that is proactive in spite of English language learners' proficiency limitations.

Successful initiatives cited are San Jose, California's CET program; Washington State's I-BEST model; Ohio's "stackable" certificates; and Maryland and Rhode Island's efforts to link adult education with demand occupations and pipeline career opportunities.

Local initiatives meeting with success in addressing workforce needs include Austin Community College (replication of the I-BEST model; a career advancement initiative for incumbent healthcare workers at Seton and St. David hospitals; and Command Spanish for English speakers in the workplace); and English at Work with its workplace ESL classes at Seton Hospital, Guero's Restaurant, and hotel and construction sites.

Information shared during the summit is being processed and will be shared as a next step in creating a regional vision for meeting the needs of emerging, incumbent, and displaced workers. For additional information, www.willread.org.

SHOP TALK is a series sponsored by Texas LEARNS to highlight promising practices and address issues, concerns, and questions related to meeting the adult education needs of Texas' emerging, incumbent, and displaced workers. For additional information or to request that a particular topic be addressed, contact Barbara Tondre at btondre@earthlink.net