

The **INSTITUTE** for
Public Policy & Economic Development

A partnership among Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton, & Wilkes University

Introduction

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development has created a policy statement focusing on regional planning with emphasis on career preparedness. Currently, the region's plan for career preparedness involves projects in high school that help students identify strengths and possible career interests, as well as offering vocational courses. By working to ensure students are properly educated, this region has made a commitment to education and in turn, economic stability.

Findings

State Requirements

Pennsylvania students must complete a project in one or more areas of concentrated study under the guidance and direction of the high school faculty. The purpose of the project, which may include research, writing, completion of a college application or some other appropriate form of demonstration, is to assure that students are able to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information and communicate significant knowledge and understanding.

Pennsylvania's Department of Education requires students to pass proficiency examinations and complete a number of mathematics and English courses in order to graduate. Moreover, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has determined that beginning in the *2016-2017 school year*, students must also demonstrate proficiency in American History/Civics and Government/World History (one of three), English Language, English Literature, Algebra I/Geometry/Algebra II (two of three), and Biology/Chemistry (one).

Lackawanna & Luzerne Counties

Lackawanna County has a number of offerings in both career preparation and traditional learning fields. West Scranton High School, for example, has an entire section of its course listings devoted to "Vocational Electives" (e.g., cosmetology, horticulture and landscaping, electronics). Mid Valley High School also offers a number of classes aimed to prepare students for placement in careers after graduation, but it also places a great emphasis on completing a senior project as a means to succeed, integrating requirements for the project into other required classes. While Lackawanna County does not have specific vocational schools, it does offer continuing education and career/vocational training programs.

Luzerne County has a variety of career preparation methods in its secondary schools. Hazleton Area High School offers a number of classes in “Career Preparation” (e.g., welding, law enforcement). In the Wilkes-Barre Area School District’s secondary schools, career preparation courses are available and a lengthy senior project begins during students’ sophomore year. While it would be advantageous for students to use this project as a jumping off point for a possible future educational focus or job, many students do not view this project in that light. In addition to these schools, Luzerne County has a number of vocational schools that work in conjunction with traditional schools and area businesses to provide students with co-op programs.

Educational Accessibility

In both Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, career preparedness education is being taught; however, not all of these programs are equal. Larger school districts, such as Hazleton, Wilkes-Barre, and Scranton, provide courses designed to teach students about specific careers after high school (cosmetology, electrician, mechanics, etc.). Smaller school districts place a greater emphasis on senior projects – analyzing and presenting research that they do in conjunction with a faculty advisor. Vocational education is more likely to be found in more urban settings than in suburban or rural school districts. Currently, no programs are offered that focus on the region’s new alternative energy industry.

Job Availability

Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties have experienced tremendous job growth in the areas of alternative energy and health care. In terms of alternative energy, the counties could see a boom with proposed drilling for natural gas in Marcellus Shale. It remains to be seen what will happen with natural gas drilling, but jobs with drilling companies and complementary industries could grow from the continued drilling for the alternative energy resource. With an aging population, Northeast Pennsylvania can expect many jobs to continue to be created to accommodate the need for health professionals. In addition, other industries are seeking financial and computer science professionals in the continuation of Wall Street West.

Issues

In order for school districts to adequately provide the education necessary for students to be prepared for higher education and/or careers, they must further emphasize the need for education beyond high school. Reports have shown that those who obtain only a high school degree are less likely to be employed than those holding an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree. It is increasingly vital to have some post-secondary education in today’s economy. Technical schools, two- and four-year colleges, and certificate programs offer more programs that teach students how to succeed in such work environments.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania requires high school graduates to complete a comprehensive senior project. School districts interpret this project in different ways. For instance, sometimes schools allow small group projects to take place of individual projects. Other schools begin the senior project process during the sophomore, junior or senior year. There is little consistency in this region concerning how students are required to handle these

projects. Ultimately, it is up to schools and their faculties who advise students to work on and complete the project.

Students learn in different ways. Some are hands-on learners, while others learn best through lectures and note-taking. Also, some students know early on that they do not want to pursue higher education in a college/university setting. One curriculum is not necessarily going to engage and/or satisfy the educational needs of every student within a district. Schools are forced to produce a number of elective courses in addition to required classes in English, social studies, math, and science. School districts face significant costs pertaining to career preparedness courses due to additional hiring (field experts), insurances, and supplies.

Acquiring the funding necessary to offer effective career preparedness programs is difficult. Programs in cosmetology, welding, electrical engineering and others come at a high cost to taxpayers. Currently, school districts have a difficult time funding core programs and additional costs towards career preparedness courses leave them with a tight budget. Taxpayers are aware of trends in education and may be unwilling to help fund programs that do not work to send students to colleges or universities.

Policy Guidelines

In order to implement a regional policy regarding career preparedness, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties must come together and develop programs for students to learn about the opportunities in this region and find out how best to prepare themselves for such opportunities. A regional policy would ensure students have access to the education that best fits their future goals. Promoting a variety of educational options will attract more students to these industries and allow those who would otherwise drop out of school to remain in the classroom and focus on a subject that better suits their goals. By committing to bettering the education of today's students, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties are committing to the long-term growth and development of Northeast Pennsylvania.

Emphasize the need for post-secondary education by:

1. Developing programs that meet the needs of broad student interests;
2. Stressing the need for additional training in whatever career choice students make;
3. Securing local business or government leaders to talk to students about hiring processes and how they can work to make themselves the best candidate for the job; and
4. Working with students to identify strengths and how they are best utilized after high school.

Offer career preparedness programs by:

1. Applying for federal and state grants to pay for such programs;
2. Working with business and government partners to provide free lectures and seminars;
3. Offering co-op programs for students to simultaneously attend school and work;
4. Further development of programs by which students from area schools may attend classes and receive college credit from local higher education institutions;

5. Hiring professionals on a part-time basis to teach vocational electives, such as cosmetology, electrical engineering, and welding, as well as newer industry demands such as alternative energy management;
6. Working with vocational schools to find job placements for students upon graduation; and
7. Collaborate and share resources, both internal and external to school district boundaries.

Educate students about regional issues by:

1. Working with Workforce Investment Boards and local economic development groups to identify growing industry clusters and occupations, and pass on skill and education requirements using career ladders;
2. Bringing local leaders into the classroom to discuss how the region is changing and what today's students can look forward to in the near future; and
3. Inviting area college professors to discuss the region's popular industries and how they can be best educated to fill openings within those industries.

Regional Plan Outcomes

The regional plan should seek to:

- Coordinate economic development, workforce development, and Pre-K – 20 to create a seamless economic development plan for the future;
- Further educate the Lackawanna and Luzerne County students in ways that help them prepare for college and a career;
- Cultivate new and exciting career preparedness classes/opportunities;
- Involve the local business community in the process of educating and informing students;
- Provide opportunities for students to gain experience, while gaining exposure to a comprehensive, traditional education;
- Encourage students to pursue careers in industries that best match their skills and interests;
- Promote the practical application of lessons learned in secondary school; and
- Encourage students to pursue opportunities within Northeast Pennsylvania.

Policy Statements

I. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports collaboration between workforce development, economic development and Pre-K - 20 to ensure that business needs are met through ongoing education and training of the current and future workforce.

2. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports the further development of career preparedness programs and electives that allow students to sample post-high school career and vocational opportunities. Such programs would allow students to identify strengths and gain valuable experience learning about steps needed to achieve their goals.

3. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports school districts that promote to students both higher education and vocational options. The Institute supports schools that allow students to make their own choices concerning their future. We support schools that give students the opportunity to explore a number of possibilities that lead them to determine what is best for them.

4. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports the improvement and creation of more vocational schools in both Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties. The Institute believes alternative learning methods are needed in today's economy and vocational training is one way in which students interested in pursuing careers in hands-on jobs can obtain the training and experience needed to compete for jobs.

5. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports policies aimed at encouraging students to pursue any educational avenue after graduation. The Institute recognizes that a post-secondary education is crucial in today's economy and that students and stakeholders must be proactive in their pursuit of jobs/highly trained employees.

6. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development encourages school districts to foster a sense of importance when it comes to education. The Institute believes that education is the key to a successful and fruitful life. We feel that an increased emphasis on the importance of education will lead teachers and students more actively engaged in the learning process.

7. The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development encourages Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties to work to obtain grant funding in addition to state and federal funding for career preparedness/vocational training. It is vital for regional stakeholders and relevant governments to be financially engaged in the process of properly educating our students. The Institute urges Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties to pursue additional funding.

Policy Position

Lackawanna and Luzerne County school districts must support the goal of providing a quality education, whether traditional or vocational, for the region's students. County governments should strive to offer a variety of options to students of all ages and work towards equipping students with the proper education and tools to successfully transition into the workplace. Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties should identify and strive to change or eliminate planning policies, regulations, and programs that have a disparate impact on groups identified by race, ethnicity, economic status or disability.

Equal Opportunity. Lackawanna and Luzerne County school districts must be aware of the choices students have when entering the workforce. School districts must offer a variety of

choices so that students may make the best choice for themselves and their future. In order to prepare students for the future, school districts must do a better job of preparing students for the challenges ahead.

Schools must provide varied opportunities for students to explore their skills and determine where they have potential and desire to grow. Offering a wide range of courses with traditional subjects (English, History, Math, Science) as well as vocational electives (cosmetology, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering) would allow students to experience subjects that may peak their interest and complement their skill sets.

Students should be given opportunities to engage in projects that will allow them to identify their strengths and weaknesses. School districts must continue to foster hard work and ingenuity on senior projects, so they are able to work on subjects important to them. Senior projects are gateways to possible careers; students should not be discouraged from studying and analyzing whatever they find interesting. Every student should have the opportunity to study what will make him or her succeed.

Expansion of Senior Projects. Students are influenced at an earlier and earlier age. Schools must help them identify their strengths earlier in their education. School districts must also make efforts to go above and beyond Pennsylvania Department of Education guidelines.

Junior high school students should also have opportunities to explore their skills and advance their research and presentation skills. Teachers and parents must work to help students determine what interests them and how they can apply their skills to a project. A junior high project could be completed any time during a students' time in the junior high school and could be assigned for the summer – so that students continue knowledge and applications learned during the school year.

Promoting the region while looking beyond. Northeast Pennsylvania will see a boost in the coming years in terms of both conventional and alternative energy. Lackawanna and Luzerne County school districts should not push students toward these fields specifically, but they should make students aware of the needs in their own back yard. No doubt, students must be prepared for jobs within and beyond Northeast Pennsylvania.

In an increasingly global economy, students must learn the basics of globalization and how goods and services produced here could very well be used on the other side of the world. It would be fascinating for students to learn how, by working together, the world can function efficiently and in a sustainable manner. Careers in alternative energy, health care, electrical engineering, and business all can be attained on the local, national and international stages. Schools must be prepared to educate students beyond what their eyes can see.

Education is the key to a solid future. This sentiment must be a mantra in Lackawanna and Luzerne County schools. Parents, teachers and students must know that education is the key to prosperity. Whether it is through a career in public service or work in the private sector, education will get help them to obtain the best possible careers to help result in a happy and satisfying life. Vocational electives, core requirements, and other opportunities for students should all be seen as career stepping stones and building blocks.

The Institute urges school districts to work with students of all abilities to help them achieve their educational and career goals. All types of education are vital to a functioning American economy. We need electricians just as much as we need doctors; we need welders just as much as we need accountants. We must fully educate students, as the value of an education goes beyond dollars and cents.

Resources:

*The Center for Workforce Information & Analysis
Pennsylvania Department of Education*