

# **Essential Skills Dialogue**

## **Lincoln County Summary Report**

May 5, 1999

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On May 5, 1999, in Stanford, Kentucky, 41 people spent three hours in a structured dialogue session centered around the topic of essential work skills. The participants included 14 Lincoln County educators, 14 high school students from across Lincoln County, and 13 employers of Lincoln County workers.

Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership Fellow Becky Burton, who works at the South Lincoln County Family Resource Center, envisioned and organized the session. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools, collaborating with the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and the research and development firm Roberts & Kay, Inc., designed the dialogue and prepared the facilitators and recorders for their work during the session.

The Lincoln County dialogue session was based on the Partnership for Kentucky Schools' report *Ready to Work: Essential Skills for Kentucky Jobs* (March, 1998). That report presents information about the skills identified as essential by Kentucky employers and how the Kentucky perspective compares to or contrasts with that of employers nationwide. Sources for the research include recently published literature, surveys, and studies, as well as personal interviews with Kentucky employers. The report does not present the views of students or educators.

The session in Lincoln County served as the first pilot in the development of a structured dialogue on improving students' work readiness. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools intends to use the Lincoln County experience as a model for similar work on this topic throughout Kentucky communities.

After initial introductions, participants first reviewed specific research findings from the *Essential Skills* report. (See the three research extracts in Attachment A.) The participants then considered these questions:

1. From a Lincoln County perspective, how accurate and relevant are the statewide research findings about what employers say they need in new employees, and what employers say about their ability to find employees who meet those needs?
2. What can students, educators, and employers do to make progress on Lincoln County students' work readiness?

Students, educators, and employers met in separate groups to discuss the main findings of the Partnership’s report and then reconvened as a whole group to explore similarities and differences in opinion. They met again, both separately and then together, to consider cooperative efforts they may initiate to ensure that all Lincoln County students are ready for work when they complete their secondary education.

This Summary Report first relates some of the ways the main findings from the Lincoln County dialogue session compare with the *Essential Skills* study and then presents Lincoln County participants’ suggestions for next steps. One word of caution: While reading this report, it is important to remember that it is the summary of a dialogue session with 41 invited participants and not the product of a systematic research effort. The findings are not intended to reflect widespread views and conditions in Lincoln County; instead, the findings are meant to advance the Partnership’s efforts on worker readiness and may be of use to the Lincoln County work group that will take responsibility for developing the next steps to improve young workers’ essential skills.

**1. Participating Lincoln County educators, employers, and students reviewed the *Essential Skills* findings on what Kentucky employers say they want in their employees and found few surprises or areas of disagreement.**

- Participants in all three groups agreed that the essential skills most consistently cited by Kentucky employers, including a positive attitude, the ability to identify and solve problems, and self-motivation, are also sought by employers in Lincoln County.
- Employers assigned the greatest importance to attracting employees who show up for work everyday, who can communicate effectively and work as part of a team, and who have good reading, math, and problem-solving skills.
- Educators pointed out that they look for many of these same qualities — such as a positive attitude, effective communication skills, the ability to follow directions, and a willingness to learn — in students.

**2. Participating educators, employers, and students did not always agree with each other on the description of young workers’ strengths and weaknesses in the *Essential Skills* report.**

- Employers in the study and in the Lincoln County dialogue session assert that young workers do not possess adequate critical-thinking skills, soft skills (including working well with others and showing up on time every day), or

personal motivation. Employers say many students do not set personal goals for work.

- Educators in the session generally agreed with employers that students lack dependability and a sense of personal responsibility and that they approach work and school with the same lack of enthusiasm.
- In contrast, many of the students in the dialogue session asserted that they *are* personally motivated and can perform the skills needed by employers. These students believe that new employees must necessarily have a willingness to learn new things if they want to keep a job. They also pointed out the need for jobs to pay well, offer decent benefits, provide adequate training, occur in a pleasant environment, and be interesting if young workers are to be expected to invest full effort and energy in them.

**3. In each work group, participants offered a unique explanation for perceived inadequacies in the essential skills of new employees, as detailed in the *Essential Skills* report.**

After considering how the *Essential Skills* findings applied to Lincoln County, participants quickly turned their attention to the causes of the perceived gaps between employer wishes and new workers' capabilities.

- Educators pointed to an absence of family support for education and to parents' responsibility to instill a strong work ethic and sense of personal motivation in their children.
- Many employers said students are not being taught critical thinking skills or soft skills in school and lack a commitment to setting and meeting personal goals.
- Significant numbers of students focused on the scarcity of good jobs close to home and said employers prejudge young people and their abilities and are unwilling to take a chance on hiring them.

**4. All three groups validated many of the suggested steps for improvement gleaned from the *Essential Skills* study as well as offered some additions.**

- Significant numbers of participants in all three groups reported that reality stores, job-shadowing, internships, career fairs, and "school to career" programs are effective and should receive additional support and endorsement from schools and

businesses. Participating students also believe that more young people should take advantage of these programs.

- In addition to strengthening existing work readiness programs, participants would like to forge more business-school partnerships and encourage other Lincoln County employers and educators to establish a presence in each others' workplaces.
  - ▶ For educators, this entails visiting businesses and industries to learn more about the needs of employers and to gain a better understanding of the demands of the workplace.
  - ▶ For employers, such a partnership would include speaking to business classes and inviting students and educators to make frequent tours of their facilities.
  - ▶ Students would also like an opportunity to visit businesses or other places of employment. They view internships as a way to “prove themselves” to employers.
- Students assigned an enormous degree of importance to their need to be treated with respect if people expect them to behave respectfully in the workplace. They identified some practical aspects of respect, such as being treated fairly and afforded the same opportunities in the workplace even when they choose non-traditional clothing or hair styles. No other group mentioned this aspect of change, the *Essential Skills* report does not address it, and the three-hour format did not offer any occasion for other groups to address this view.
- Educators showed strong support for developing an on-site vocational school for those not going to college, a next step that neither students nor employers considered at any length.

The students' focus on respect and the educators' agreement about the need for a vocational school both arose too late in the three-hour dialogue to be addressed in any way by the rest of the participants. The emergence of these strongly supported ideas toward the end of the dialogue reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of the three-hour design: it is long enough to discover significant agreement (or disagreement) and highlight significant areas needing more work, but it is too short to work effectively on major ideas not widely shared or widely considered by participants.

In spite of these shortcomings, the Lincoln County participants reported that the dialogue session met their goals of offering a real opportunity for working effectively on essential skills in Lincoln County. In addition, the session provided significant information for the Partnership for Kentucky

Schools as it further develops a model for dialogue on the topic of worker readiness for statewide use.

**5. In order to build on the initial dialogue and the findings of the *Essential Skills* research, people in the Lincoln County session agreed they need to create structures and strategies to increase communication and contact among participants in the three groups, and among others in the area with an interest in Lincoln County students' readiness for work.**

- Participants want to establish a mechanism for ongoing communication among the different groups. One suggestion was to build capacity in an existing committee, the School to Career Advisory Council, which would include these actions:
  - ▶ Charge the committee to address the issues and ideas generated during the dialogue;
  - ▶ Ensure that the committee includes students, educators, employers, and any other people interested in the preparedness of Lincoln County students;
  - ▶ Invest energy to see that the committee holds purposeful regular meetings and gets its work done.
- Participants would also like to hold additional dialogue sessions in which students, educators, and employers meet together in small groups to discuss the issues in greater depth and to gain better understanding of each others' opinions. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools observed that parents would be a strong addition to future dialogues, as well.
- Participants want to develop a resource guide for Lincoln County that lists the various opportunities offered by businesses, such as internships, job shadowing, or available positions.
- Educators would like to visit job sites during the summer to develop a deeper understanding of daily operations. Employers recommended that educators receive professional development credit for such efforts.
- Participants would also like to see more career counselors in schools and more encouragement for students to use them.

## Conclusion

- The *Essential Skills* report served as a reasonable foundation for a community to convene a diverse group to consider how to improve the work readiness of students in their county. It helped people move quickly to identify areas of agreement and diverging views.
- The structured dialogue seemed an appropriate strategy for getting people started — it allowed them to learn about each others' interests in a relatively informal atmosphere. It also seemed to bring the right people to the table.
- The Lincoln County dialogue session was good as a starting point, but only as a starting point. There is a need for more work that builds on the base the dialogue created. In particular, participants feel they would benefit from more one-on-one dialogue with people outside their own peer group.
- The three groups present seemed (mostly) enthusiastic about continuing and getting something done. Most participants agreed that the dialogue session generated good ideas about ways to improve the school/work connection in Lincoln County.

## **Attachment A**

### **What Kentucky Employers Say They Want in New Employees...**

Employers want employees who:

1. will show up on time every day;
2. have a positive attitude toward work;
3. have good math and reading skills;
4. are willing and able to learn;
5. can communicate effectively;
6. can identify and solve problems;
7. can work well with others;
8. can follow directions;
9. are self motivated and self-directed.

*These are listed in no particular order.*

## What Kentucky Employers Say about the Present Reality...

1. The basic skills of job applicants are unsatisfactory, especially in writing, communication skills, mathematics, and reading comprehension.
2. Many new employees lack a willingness to learn new things.
3. The skill level needed is increasing while the skill level of applicants is decreasing.
4. This generation of new employees does not display a positive attitude toward work, nor does it demonstrate a good work ethic.
5. Many employees lack the ability to be self-directive or self-motivated.
6. New employees lack a desire to work once they report for a job.

*These are listed in no particular order.*

## Opportunities for Employers and Educators

### *What Employers Can Do...*

1. Encourage employers to ask for high school transcripts, and encourage schools to make transcripts meaningful for employers by including information about such things as attendance, punctuality, and course difficulty.
2. Begin teacher exchange programs to give teachers workplace experience that helps them gain a better understanding of the demands placed on new employees.
3. Involve more teachers in learning at the workplace.
4. Encourage teachers to focus on the value of learning and to help their students recognize the need for life-long learning.
5. Develop work-to-school programs with representatives of different occupations serving as mentors and classroom resources.
6. Establish business networks with middle and high school students on drop-out prevention programs.
7. Encourage business involvement in career opportunity awareness programs.

### *What Educators Can Do...*

1. Expand schools' use of professional development programs for teachers that focus on the development of skills identified in the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report.
2. Teach the basic skills of employability — how to dress, act, and respond in the workplace — and start teaching them early.
3. Incorporate personal management skills into every class.
4. Incorporate instruction on teamwork and other “people skills” into the classroom.
5. Challenge students with higher level, relevant course and emphasize the workplace as part of career education.
6. Establish more co-op, internship, and pre-apprenticeship programs.
7. Emphasize the integration of knowledge across disciplines.
8. Teach basic economics and personal financial management to all students.
9. Teach more entrepreneurial skills.

10. Develop programs that focus on self-esteem, self-confidence, and the importance of attitude.

## ATTACHMENT B

### Assessment of the Lincoln County Essential Skills Dialogue May 5, 1999

Thirty-six participants (out of 41) turned in an assessment form.

1. In my opinion, this session was:

Response	Number of responses
Really useful	20
Somewhat useful	15
Not very useful	1
I wasted my time here	0

2. The session was:

Response	Number of responses
Organized from A to Z	21
Mostly organized (maybe from A to N?)	13
Not as organized as it should have been	2
The total opposite of organized	0

3. The session provided:

Response	Number of responses
Many good ideas about ways to improve the school/work connection in Lincoln County	25
Some pretty good ideas we might use	11
Not enough ideas, or not useful enough ideas, about what we can actually do next	0
A complete idea vacuum	0

## Comments:

- ▶ I am willing to work.
- ▶ I don't think they took us students seriously. Instructions were fuzzy. They showed little respect toward us. They judged us for our looks/appearance, made us feel uncomfortable. They kept interrupting us while we were speaking our mind. Unnecessary remarks were made toward students who came today.
- ▶ There wasn't enough respect between the different groups. The instructions were not very clear (with the placing of dots). It seemed as though only a few of the employers and educators really cared about what the students' opinions were. They seemed to show little respect or interest in us. They judged us by the way we were dressed and talked about the students' attire in front of other students. The adults (although, not all) seemed like they were downing our ideas. This made the students uncomfortable around them. Overall, the program was useful and effective, just the people whom were invited sort of ruined it.
- ▶ I felt like the students really weren't taken seriously. Unnecessary remarks were made toward a certain student's attire by an adult which was uncalled for. I felt real uncomfortable.
- ▶ Would be helpful to have session and groups with mix of students, educators, employers.
- ▶ Could we have a "mixed" group of employers, educators, and students?
- ▶ Let's don't let this drop — keep the discussion going — move it to a practice level.
- ▶ Bring in a different mix of students, not just top-notch or very bottom, but those in between. Lengthen the time of session (afternoon).
- ▶ I really enjoyed being a part of this. It was a great experience. I liked talking with the different groups.
- ▶ I feel like this was a very useful opportunity. I hope that there are going to be things done to make this stuff happen.
- ▶ New facility improvement⇒bathrooms, etc. Start off was rocky. Have name tags done and available, introductions by staff arranging course.
- ▶ Have frequent meetings.
- ▶ I think that there should be more meetings like this.
- ▶ It was very interesting and helpful.
- ▶ I thought it was a useful program and meeting!

- ▶ Time constraints limited output (quality and quantity); there may have been too much attempted for time available; more time focused on fewer objectives might have produced more specific, applicable ideas/suggestions/actions
- ▶ Group session could have been a little longer for discussion; more interaction between students/teachers/employers
- ▶ Being walked on isn't a life goal. Look and you will see that we are winning the war. There will be big changes. And we will be ready and you will not be up to [??]
- ▶ Would like to see more average and below-average students invited to give input.
- ▶ I'd like to see cross functional teams composed of educators, employers, and students. This should aid in addressing and dismissing stereotypes so that more time can be spend focusing on the issues.
- ▶ Mr. C. was right, you didn't give us enough credit. You laughed at us. I changed my mind; apparently you stink and we came here to be laughed at by the adults.