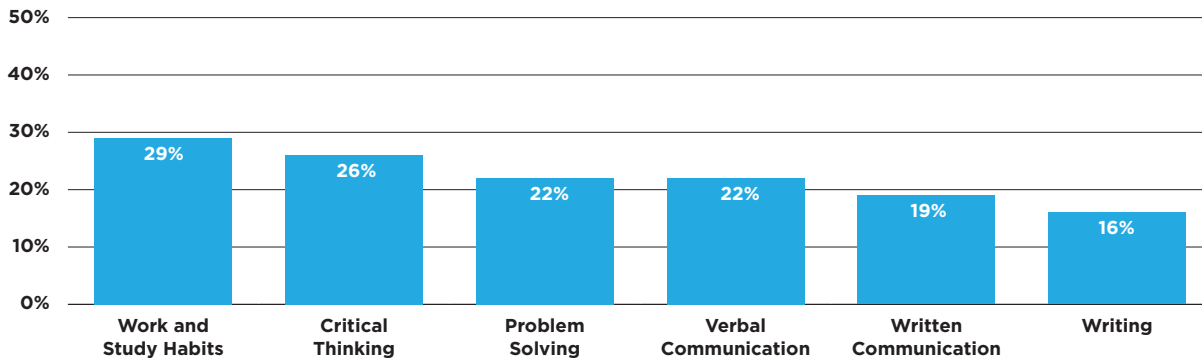


Preparing Students for College and Career: Rhode Island Business Leader Perspectives

College and Career Readiness Skills That Employers Most Value



Source: *Rising to the challenge: Views on high school graduates' preparedness for college and careers.* (2015). Retrieved February 27, 2018, from www.achieve.org. (Note: Question asked "In which ONE or TWO areas, if any, do you most wish U.S. public high schools were doing a better job of preparing their students for the expectations of college/the work world.")

A recent national survey conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies found that employers believe that, as a whole, public high schools are not adequately preparing high school graduates to meet the expectations they will face in college and in the workforce. In particular, employers wished that public schools better prepared students in terms of work and study habits, critical thinking, problem solving, verbal communication, written communication, and writing.¹

Adopting student-centered learning practices can help students develop meaningful relationships with adults inside and outside of school, increase engagement and achievement for students from a variety of backgrounds, and ensure that students graduate from high school with the important social/emotional, executive function, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills, and strong work habits that are essential for success in college and careers.^{2,3,4,5} For these reasons, nationally and in Rhode Island, we are seeing a move toward student-centered learning – learning that is personalized, competency-based, can happen anytime and anywhere, and allows students to take ownership over their own learning.

This report presents findings from interviews with Rhode Island business leaders. These interviews were designed to assess how student-centered learning practices being implemented in Rhode Island are helping (or could help) prepare students for success in college and careers.

Interviewees included:

- **Ana Almeida-DoRosario**, Community Outreach Coordinator, Lifespan Community Health Institute
- **Michael Grey**, Vice President, Sodexo; Chair, Governor’s Workforce Board of Rhode Island; and Trustee, Career and Technical Education Board
- **Tim Hebert**, CEO and Founder, Trilix; Chief Managed Services Officer, Carousel Industries
- **Janet Raymond**, Senior Vice President, Providence Chamber of Commerce; Chair, Providence/Cranston Workforce Investment Board

Student-Centered Learning Practices Prepare Students for Today's Workplace

Michael Grey serves as Vice President at Sodexo, as Chair of the Governor's Workforce Board of Rhode Island, and as a Trustee on Rhode Island's Career and Technical Education Board. He believes that student-centered learning helps to "solve some of the problems of helplessness that lead students to drop out and feel disconnected between the work they are doing in school and their future." When students are engaged in their learning, they are more likely to stay on track to graduate and to gain the skills they need for the rest of their lives.

Tim Hebert is the CEO and Founder of Trilix and Chief Managed Services Officer of Carousel Industries, both of which specialize in information technology services. Hebert says that student-centered learning practices help students acquire the skills that are key in the workplace, such as collaboration, communication, and personal motivation.

Hebert also serves as a mentor at the Academy of Career Exploration (ACE), a district charter school in Providence, RI that focuses on applying student-centered learning practices to prepare students for careers in information technology. As a mentor, he observes students guiding their own learning through project-based work, computer-based research, and hands-on learning. At ACE, teachers serve as facilitators, coaches, and mentors rather than lecturers. Hebert says, "Students are not just sitting at a desk quietly listening to someone speak. There is more engagement in the classroom." Hebert believes students are prepared for success in the workplace when they are engaged in long-term projects, work in teams, and let their passions guide their learning.

Encouraging Collaboration Between Schools and Businesses

According to Hebert, "One of the biggest problems we have in our society is we have a separation between education and business. Business complains about the lack of education and education complains about the lack of involvement of business." He says, "Businesses need to make it imperative to get involved in the education process in communities." As the workplace changes and there are fewer manual labor jobs, Hebert says, "We need to prepare kids to take thinking, creative, and innovative jobs."

Grey agrees that "The opportunity for students to know about your industry, product, or mission in advance, before they get out of school is beneficial." By creating career pipelines in schools, businesses can collaborate with schools to design trainings and curriculum that can ensure that students have the knowledge, interest, skills, and passion to become successful. Grey says, "Businesses complain that they can't find talent. Make the talent! Develop the people to meet the needs of today!"

In order to meet the needs of business and best prepare students for successful careers, Hebert recommends that businesses bring students into their workplaces through job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and tours. He says, "The more we can get students at a young age acclimated to the business world, the more success they will have making the transition [from school]." Ideally, businesses take it one step further and encourage employees to serve as mentors.

PrepareRI

PrepareRI launched in 2016 after Rhode Island was awarded a New Skills for Youth grant from JPMorgan Chase and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). PrepareRI is a strategic partnership among the Rhode Island state government, private industry leaders, the public education system, universities, and nonprofits across the state. This collaboration was undertaken to help prepare all Rhode Island youth with the skills they need for jobs that pay. Many of the goals of PrepareRI are aligned with student-centered learning and focused on providing students with personalized learning opportunities that address their skills, knowledge, needs, interests, and aspirations and allow them to pursue their own pathways.

PrepareRI's goals are that by 2020:

- All career pathway programs will be **aligned to Rhode Island's high-demand career fields**
- All high school students will have access to a **work-based learning experience**, such as an internship in a relevant career field
- All students, starting no later than middle school, will have **career exploration opportunities** and **individualized learning plans** based on their unique strengths and interests
- Over half of high school students will **graduate with college credit or an industry credential**
- Over half of high school students will **participate in career and technical education (CTE)**

Source: PrepareRI. (n.d.). *Prepare Rhode Island*. Retrieved August 17, 2018, from www.prepare-ri.org

Mentoring Benefits Students and Businesses

According to Hebert, at Trilix every employee is engaged in some kind of community involvement, which ranges from participation in a one-time program or presentation at a job fair to an ongoing mentoring relationship. Hebert says this engagement builds the company's goodwill, creates loyalty, and attracts more people to work at the business. Staff members at all of Hebert's companies volunteer once or twice a month as mentors with a focus on at-risk students and students who may need support determining their life direction.

Mentoring is not only beneficial to the students involved as mentees. It can also benefit the business. Hebert says, "When employees get engaged [in the community], they get a good feeling about themselves" and their ability to impact someone else's life. This leads them to become better employees because they "become more productive and engaged when they feel they have a purpose and meaning."

Ana Almeida-DoRosario from Lifespan offers advice to other organizations that are interested in developing a mentoring program. In particular, she recommends identifying a staff member who is dedicated to community-based or youth-based work to oversee the program and allowing sufficient time to recruit mentors, which may take longer than anticipated.

Internships Benefit Students and Businesses

Janet Raymond is the Senior Vice President of Operations and Economic Development for the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce and Chair of the Providence/Cranston Workforce Investment Board. She thinks it is important for students to explore career options before graduating from high school, because it helps them recognize "what is expected of them once they reach the working world." She says, "It is okay if the student realizes that they didn't like the experience so they can move on and figure out what they do like. It is important as a component of helping them to try to figure out what they want to do in life."

The Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce was instrumental in laying the groundwork for PrepareRI. It supported the development of Skills for RI Future and later hosted a summer internship program at Hope High School in Providence, RI that was modeled after the Boston Private Industry Council.

The Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with Citizens Bank and the Center for Labor Studies at Northeastern University, conducted a survey of its member businesses regarding their workplace needs. "One overarching need that almost all respondents stated was the lack of soft skills in job applicants," Raymond says, "That's why programs like PrepareRI and internships for high school students are so important because it teaches them essential skills. Schools are getting better at teaching these skills but there is more work to do."

Lifespan's Mentoring Program

Lifespan's mentoring program supports 28 juniors and seniors from the Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex, a Providence public high school, and nine students from the Rhode Island Nursing Institute Middle College, a public charter school. Students meet with their mentors at least once a month for an hour at school, at the mentor's workplace, or in a community setting. Mentors help students explore potential careers of interest by setting up job shadowing opportunities and working with students to map out paths to help them achieve their career goals. They also help them write cover letters and resumes and prepare for interviews. In addition to supporting students' career goals, mentors also support students' social and personal well-being.

Schools support the mentoring program by doing outreach with students, supporting the application process, and providing oversight. Students fill out applications, submit teacher recommendations, and are interviewed. High school seniors who are in good standing at school and have healthy mentoring relationships are paid to serve as Student Liaisons and regularly check in with student mentees.

Lifespan employees who want to become mentors fill out applications, complete background (BCI) checks, are interviewed, and attend a mandatory mentor orientation. Mentors make a two-year commitment to their mentee.

Source: Ana Almeida-DoRosario, Community Outreach Coordinator, Lifespan Community Health Institute.



Profile of a Successful Worker

The workforce leaders interviewed were asked to provide the profile of a successful worker. Responses fell into five main categories:

- 1 Work habits:** Having a strong work ethic, being dependable, showing up on time, knowing how to dress appropriately, and having the desire to continue learning.
- 2 Ability to collaborate:** Ability to work as part of a team, knowing how to be a team player, ability to work with colleagues with different personalities and work styles, knowing how to help others become better workers, and valuing diversity and inclusion.
- 3 Communication skills:** Ability to communicate in various settings and modalities (e.g., one-on-one, by email, by phone, with a small group, and in a large group).
- 4 Problem solving skills:** Ability to solve problems and be a critical thinker.
- 5 Passion for the work:** Being excited about the work and dedicated to the mission of the organization and having a drive to excel.

Student-centered learning and opportunities to explore careers through career pathways, mentorships, and internships while in high school can help students pursue their passions, explore careers, and develop important college and career readiness skills, including collaboration, communication, and problem solving skills and work and study habits.



Recommendations

- Offer high school students a rigorous and engaging curriculum and internships that engage students and connect academic learning to students' career goals and aspirations.
- Give high school students opportunities to acquire the collaboration, communication, and problem solving skills and work habits they need to be successful in the workplace by providing all students the opportunity to learn outside of the traditional classroom in workplaces in their communities.
- Support new and continued collaborations among public school districts and employers that support students' exploration of careers and development of college and career readiness skills through mentorships, job shadowing, and internships.



References

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- ⁵ Balfanz, R., et al. (2014). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic*. Retrieved February 17, 2016, from www.americaspromise.org

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