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TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

S. 1361 Addresses Components of Comprehensive Strategy

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SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY BY LINDA G. MORRA
TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK:
S. 1361 ADDRESSES COMPONENTS OF COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

Even though American high schools direct most of their resources toward preparing students for college, few incoming high school freshmen--about 15 percent--go on to graduate and then obtain a 4-year college degree within 6 years of high school graduation. A substantial number of the remaining 85 percent wander between different educational and employment experiences, many seemingly ill prepared for the workplace. Accordingly, some states are developing comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies to better prepare high school students for workplace requirements. Based on our review of the literature and discussions with experts, a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy would encompass the following interrelated components: (1) processes for developing the academic and occupational competencies of all students, (2) career education and development for all students, (3) extensive links between schools and employers, and (4) meaningful workplace experiences for all students.

STATUS OF COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION STRATEGIES AT THE STATE LEVEL

While no state had fully implemented a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy at the time of our survey, four states--Florida, Oregon, Tennessee, and Wisconsin--had enacted laws requiring state officials to develop and implement strategies. The school districts we observed, like the states themselves, are in the initial stages of implementing their strategies. The state and local officials, teachers, business and labor representatives, and experts we talked with identified several obstacles in developing, implementing, and accomplishing the goals of their school-to-work transition initiatives. The obstacles were the lack of information on "lessons learned" in attempting to plan and implement comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies, some federal grant program targeting provisions that limit using existing grant moneys in school-to-work transition efforts encompassing all students, and uncertain state funding for state and local initiatives.

S. 1361 ADDRESSES ALL COMPONENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

The three basic program components that the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1993 (S. 1361) would require, (1) work-based learning, (2) school-based learning, and (3) connecting activities, emphasize those that we identified as the basic elements of a comprehensive strategy. Thus, we support the direction taken by this bill to establish a national framework for the development of school-to-work opportunities systems in all states to facilitate youths' transition from school to work. Overcoming the obstacles will require much effort at the state and local levels. Officials and others in the four states we visited estimated that their school-to-work transition strategies will not be fully implemented before the year 2000.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our recent work reviewing the status of comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies at the state level. We believe our work can provide some perspective as the Committee considers S. 1361, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1993, which is designed to encourage the development of school-to-work systems in all states. As currently drafted, the proposed legislation includes provisions that would authorize development grants to support state efforts in designing school-to-work transition strategies, implementation grants for states ready to begin operation of their strategies, and support for some grants to local communities.

Our testimony is based on our recent report, Transition From School to Work: States Are Developing New Strategies to Prepare Students for Jobs, (GAO/HRD-93-139, Sep. 7, 1993), prepared at the request of the Joint Economic Committee, on comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies at the state level in the United States. To arrive at the key components of a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy, we reviewed the literature in the field of school-to-work transition and consulted with experts. To determine how many states have adopted the components of comprehensive strategies, we conducted a telephone survey of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. We also visited states and school districts we found that were implementing comprehensive strategies to gain an understanding about how state and local officials are implementing the strategies.

In brief, our analysis showed that, even though American high schools direct most of their resources toward preparing students for college, few incoming high school freshmen--about 15 percent--go on to graduate and then obtain a 4-year college degree within 6 years of high school graduation. A substantial number of the remaining 85 percent wander between different educational and employment experiences, many seemingly ill prepared for the workplace.[1]

Accordingly, some states are developing comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies to better prepare high school students for workplace requirements. While no state had fully implemented such a strategy at the time of our survey, four states--Florida, Oregon, Tennessee, and Wisconsin--have enacted statutory provisions requiring state officials to develop and implement these strategies. The

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[1]See A Nation At Risk, The National Commission on Excellence in Education (Washington, D.C.: 1983); National Center for Education and the Economy, the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! (Washington, D.C.: 1990); Gene Bottoms, et al., Making High Schools Work (Atlanta: 1992); Paul Osterman and Maria Ianozzi, Youth Apprenticeships and School-to-Work Transition: Current Knowledge and Legislative Strategy, National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (Philadelphia: 1993).

four states are now undertaking actions on the following, interrelated components of a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy:

- processes for developing academic and occupational competencies,[2]
- career education and development,
- extensive links between school systems and employers, and
- meaningful workplace experiences.

These four components, which experts have identified as necessary for a comprehensive strategy, are addressed in the three basic program components that would be required by S. 1361, namely, (1) work-based learning, (2) school-based learning, and (3) connecting activities.[3] We support the direction taken by this bill to establish a national framework for the development of school-to-work opportunities systems in all states to facilitate youths' transition from school to work. We believe, however, that overcoming the obstacles will require much effort at the state and local levels. Officials and others in the four states that we visited estimated that their school-to-work transition strategies will not be fully implemented before the year 2000.

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[2]Identifying "processes for developing academic and occupational competencies" as a component of a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy does not mean that education reform serves only school-to-work transition goals. Indeed, one could view education reform as an umbrella concept encompassing many goals, including improved school-to-work transition. For a discussion of education reform efforts in the United States, see our report, Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993). For a discussion of skill standards and certification programs to provide potential employers with assurances that applicants possess certain skills or attributes specifically related to their field of endeavor, see our report, Skill Standards: Experience in Certification Systems Shows Industry Involvement to Be Key (GAO/HRD-93-90, May 18, 1993).

[3]The three basic components listed in S. 1361 encompass the four components identified by experts in a comprehensive strategy as follows: the work-based learning component in S. 1361 encompasses meaningful workplace experiences (our fourth component), the school-based learning component includes career education and development (our second component) and processes for developing academic and occupational competencies (our first component), and the connecting activities include extensive links between school systems and employers (our third component).

BACKGROUND

The inadequate preparation of young workers has both individual and social costs. The unprepared individual forgoes considerable earnings over a lifetime while contributing to lagging national productivity growth and increasing social welfare costs.

Recent studies on education and economic competitiveness,[4] including our previous work on the subject,[5] have concluded that the goals of secondary schools should include having all youth possess good academic skills, marketable occupational skills, and appropriate workplace behaviors. We reported that the United States is lagging behind some of its primary international economic competitors--Japan, the former West Germany, Sweden, and England--in having students acquire academic and occupational skills that employers need and guiding students' transition from school to work. These foreign countries, unlike the United States, have national policies that emphasize preparing youth for employment. Specific approaches vary by country, but typically schools and employers work together to facilitate youths' work force entry. In Japan, for example, high school seniors get jobs almost exclusively through school-employer linkages, with employers basing hiring decisions on schools' recommendations. In the former West Germany, about two-thirds of all youth participate in apprenticeships.

The United States' secondary education system, on the other hand, has evolved into a multitrack system that, according to many experts, increasingly does not serve youth effectively. In the past, even though many youth in the United States had few skills and limited language and computation skills, a substantial number of youth could strive for and eventually get entry-level positions in semiskilled, higher wage manufacturing occupations.[6] Today, these kinds of jobs are increasingly being phased out; getting jobs with high-wage potential now requires higher entry-level skills. In addition, employers want employees who are versatile and able to adapt to changing conditions not only by learning new skills but also by changing their roles in the workplace--by working in teams, sharing management responsibilities, and solving problems.

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[4]What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000, U.S. Department of Labor, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (Washington, D.C.: 1991); America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! (Washington, D.C.: 1990); Making High Schools Work (Atlanta: 1992).

[5]Training Strategies: Preparing Noncollege Youth for Employment in the U.S. and Foreign Countries (GAO/HRD-90-88, May 11, 1990).

[6]Labor Issues (GAO/OCG-93-19TR, Dec. 1992).

In general, current federal grant programs supporting secondary education do not have as their goal aiding comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies at the state and local levels. Instead, the federal programs are highly targeted, mostly on specific populations of students--such as the poor, the disabled, and those with limited English proficiency--and vocational programs.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act includes provisions that would authorize development grants to support state efforts in designing school-to-work transition strategies, implementation grants for states ready to begin operation of their strategies, and waivers of certain statutory and regulatory provisions in federal job training and education programs that may impede school-to-work transition efforts. In addition, the bill would authorize some grants to local communities. The state and local efforts are required to contain three core components:

- Work-based learning that provides students with a planned program of job training and experiences in a broad range of tasks in an occupational area as well as paid work experience and workplace mentoring.

- School-based learning that includes a coherent multiyear sequence of instruction, typically beginning in the eleventh grade and ending after at least 1 year of postsecondary education, tied to high academic and skill standards. It also includes career guidance and development.

- Connecting activities to ensure the coordination of the work-based and school-based components of the school-to-work opportunities program.

LIMITED IMPLEMENTATION IN FOUR STATES

Only four states--Florida, Oregon, Tennessee, and Wisconsin--have moved to the stage of adopting, in legislation, a comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy. In the four states with comprehensive strategies, implementation progress has been limited, partly because of the newness of the strategies. Each of these states passed legislation during the 1991 to 1992 period. Representatives of nine other states told us that they are considering adopting such strategies. Three states had bills pending in their legislatures proposing such strategies (Michigan, Minnesota, and Washington); another has submitted a plan to the state Board of Regents for approval (New York); three are developing a plan for submission to the legislature (California, Rhode Island, and Vermont); and two have enacted legislation mandating the development of a plan (Arkansas and New Jersey).

In the four states that have adopted the components of a comprehensive strategy, implementation has just gotten underway and considerable uncertainties remain. The most intense activity has been in developing the academic and occupational

competencies expected of all students (first component). Most of the new statewide goals, standards, implementation activity, and reporting have been in this area. The states are placing heavy emphasis in particular on reducing dropout rates and improving the academic performance of students.

For example, Jobs for Tennessee's Graduates, a program for high school seniors who are most at risk of dropping out, is part of the state's strategy for raising the overall level of academic performance and work preparation of the state's youth. Seniors are trained throughout the year in competencies that enhance their personal work habits and employability skills; following high school graduation, specialists assist graduates in searching for and finding jobs. Oregon is one of several states developing student graduation standards. The state plans to issue Certificates of Advanced Mastery to those students who can show they meet these standards.

Progress is more limited on the other three components of the states' comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies. For example, Florida is the only state of the four with a comprehensive career education, guidance, and development program (second component). As part of that program, in the 1991-92 school year, about 64 percent of Florida's eighth graders completed career plans that are designed to help students set career goals and plan a curriculum that will help them achieve these goals. We note, though, that Florida's program predates the state's comprehensive school-to-work transition strategy, and local school districts are not required to adopt it. The other three states are just developing pilot or demonstration programs in this area.

As for establishing links between schools and employers (third component), only Oregon and Wisconsin have established joint state-business-labor bodies to systematically coordinate and monitor school-to-work transition efforts. Concerning providing meaningful workplace experiences to students (fourth component), new activities such as youth apprenticeship programs are just starting, and on a very limited basis at that. For example, Florida and Wisconsin each had their first 20 youth apprentices in the 1992-93 school year. Oregon and Tennessee will pilot their first youth apprenticeships in the 1993-94 school year. Officials in all of the states we visited, as well as in Rochester, New York, told us that they were in the process of expanding these programs to apply to more students.

The states that are furthest along in designing comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies have only begun to implement their strategies. The process of implementing them across the U.S. will take a long time. Officials and others in the four states we visited noted that implementing their strategies will be a challenge and estimated that their school-to-work transition strategies will not be fully implemented before the year 2000.

LIMITED IMPLEMENTATION AT THE SCHOOL DISTRICT LEVEL

Although we visited school districts that the states identified as exemplary, these districts--Seminole County, Florida; Portland, Oregon; Metropolitan Nashville, Tennessee; West Bend, Wisconsin; and Rochester, New York[7]--like the states themselves, are in the initial stages of implementing their comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies. We observed several common characteristics of these districts.

Similar to the approach at the state level, the principal focus of the districts is on implementing the first component: a process to provide and demonstrate academic and occupational competencies. This involves setting high standards for all students, especially to reach National Education Goals 2, 3, and 4.[8] Many researchers and educators currently are focusing on systemwide reform as having the greatest potential to improve student learning and achieve the National Education Goals.[9] Thus, one could view education reform as an umbrella covering many goals, including improved school-to-work transition. The other components of comprehensive strategies are largely in the planning stage.

Only one of the districts, Seminole County School District in Florida, has a broad-based career education, guidance, and counseling program integrated into its curriculum to reach all youth (second component). Two of its elements are the development of self- and career-awareness for students in kindergarten through fifth grade and the development of career goals by eighth grade.

Although all districts have traditional employer input into vocational curriculum, implementation of business links in other areas (third component) is, by-and-large, unsystematic. Contacts include business participation on advisory committees, teacher internships in industry, and private-sector employees teaching science and tutoring in the schools. To help establish links between the school and the business community, the Roosevelt Renaissance program in Portland, Oregon, has hired an individual who was formerly employed in private sector-business. The situation in

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[7]We visited Rochester, New York, even though it was not in one of our case study states because our expert consultants had identified it as having a specially funded, model comprehensive strategy.

[8]Early in 1990, the President and the nation's governors agreed to a set of six National Education Goals for the year 2000. Goal 2 concerns graduation from school; goal 3, academic achievement and citizenship; and goal 4, math and science achievement.

[9]Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993), p. 2.

Rochester, New York, is unique in this regard because the business community takes an active leadership role in establishing strong, coordinated ties with the city school district. For example, the Rochester Business Education Alliance works with the National Center on Education and the Economy to raise local businesses' understanding and awareness of education's growing and changing needs. The Industrial Management Council, an association of about 300 companies, is helping the school board select existing school-to-work programs for inclusion in the district's school-to-work transition initiative. It sponsors a career education program that has courses and 6-week internships for teachers in various companies.

All of the districts have some form of workplace exposure programs (fourth component) to help orient youth to the world of work and allow them to see the relevance of their education. However, the districts generally focus their efforts on vocational students and often on those they think to be at risk of dropping out. Furthermore, it is not clear that workplace experiences are structured to ensure transition to jobs with career potential. All the districts we visited were in the process of expanding these programs to apply to all students but have far to go.

MANY OBSTACLES EXIST

The state and local officials, teachers, business and labor representatives, and experts we talked with identified several obstacles encountered in developing, implementing, and accomplishing the goals of their school-to-work transition initiatives. Some of the obstacles they mentioned include:

- Some employers, especially small business employers, are reluctant to offer workplace opportunities to youth because of the extra management time and costs that would be incurred for training and supervising the youth and the additional cost to employers for insurance.

- School officials and teachers may have few contacts in the business world, making it difficult to establish links with employers.

- Many parents who have traditional expectations may doubt that a new approach with a strong orientation to the workplace is the best preparation for college for their own children. Some parents may perceive the new school-to-work transition programs as a form of vocational education.

- State funding is uncertain for state and local initiatives, including funding for full-time staff dedicated to school-to-work transition initiatives.

- Some federal grant program targeting provisions limit the use of existing grant moneys in school-to-work transition efforts encompassing all students. For

example, we were advised in one jurisdiction that the eligibility requirements of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) make it difficult to use JTPA funds in that jurisdiction's comprehensive school-to-work transition effort.

- Some regional economies do not afford numerous and promising career path jobs. The available jobs may be in low-growth occupations, low-skilled and low-paying occupations, or in businesses with limited futures.

- Information on "lessons learned" is not often collected or available on the experiences of other jurisdictions in attempting to plan and implement comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies.

THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK OPPORTUNITIES ACT OF 1993 ADDRESSES ALL COMPONENTS OF COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

The three basic program components that would be required by S. 1361 are consistent with the components identified in our report as necessary to a comprehensive strategy--improved academic performance, training in occupational skills demanded by employers, orientation to the world of work and career guidance and development to provide the information youth need to make informed decisions about their future. Thus, we support the direction of this proposal not only because it contains the components we found to be necessary for a comprehensive strategy but also because it addresses several other issues we raised in our report.

The bill addresses two concerns we raised regarding ways to maximize federal efforts in this area, namely that

- planning and implementation grants be given only for comprehensive school-to-work transition strategies, where the emphasis is on linking plans and actions with the components, toward the goal of having all youth possess good academic skills, marketable occupational skills, and appropriate workplace behaviors; and

- evaluation grants be made for studies designed to measure meaningful outcomes, such as better employment and earnings patterns.

Our report also stated that the federal government could make it easier for state and local officials to use existing targeted grants in school-to-work transition efforts, an issue the proposal addresses with a waiver provision for certain program requirements. This could make it easier for state and local officials to use existing targeted grants in school-to-work transition efforts. This procedure would not necessarily undermine the goals of the affected programs, particularly if the

legislation authorizing the waivers stipulated that waivers could not affect any provision relating to the basic purposes or goals of the programs.[10]

In addition, relatively little information is available on what school-to-work transition strategies would work in the United States. This is largely an uncharted area for most states and school districts and, as we were told, is likely to take a long time. As more state legislatures and local bodies take action, information will be developed on successful and less successful initiatives, and we believe the role outlined in S. 1361 for the federal government in reporting on these experiences is useful. This would include reporting on federal and nonfederal evaluations of the experiences.

Recently, federal attention has been focused on systemic education reform that is directed to improving the overall educational system for all students; it is not limited to support of specific populations of students. Supporting the development of a school-to-work opportunities system, as envisioned in S. 1361, is consistent with improving the overall educational system for all students and provides the continued strong federal leadership that this difficult undertaking requires.

One issue that we would like to raise in closing is the level of emphasis that should be placed on career guidance and development and how early in a child's education it should start. Many of the experts we talked to recommended that all students participate in career guidance and development programs starting before the eighth grade and preferably earlier.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions that you or members of the Committee might have.

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[10]Such a waiver safeguard is contained in S. 1361.

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