



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regional Workforce Development Planning Forums Findings, Priorities, & Strategies

March 2020

BACKGROUND

The Southwest Minnesota Workforce Development Board (WDB) is one of Minnesota’s 16 local workforce development boards designated under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. This broad stakeholder group is responsible for assuring that a diverse set of services are available for job seekers and businesses so that the region has a diverse and quality workforce to meet the needs of Southwest Minnesota or Local Workforce Development Area # 6. Area #6 is made up of 14 counties in Southwest Minnesota, including Big Stone, Chippewa, Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Rock, Swift, and Yellow Medicine Counties. It also encompasses two economic development regions (EDRs), #6W and 8.

Each Development Area must submit a Workforce Development Plan to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). The Governor also submits a State Plan to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor that outlines a four-year strategy for the State’s workforce development system.

WDB engaged Cheryl K. Glaeser with Achieve Consulting as a neutral facilitator to help them set priorities and goals by engaging staff, board, and regional stakeholders in regional workforce forums. A broad stakeholder survey and workforce development forums held on February 25, 2020 in Slayton and February 28, 2020 in Granite Falls provided insights for updating and prioritizing overarching goals and strategies for the next two plus years.

WIOA REQUIREMENTS AND BOARD/STAFF INSIGHTS

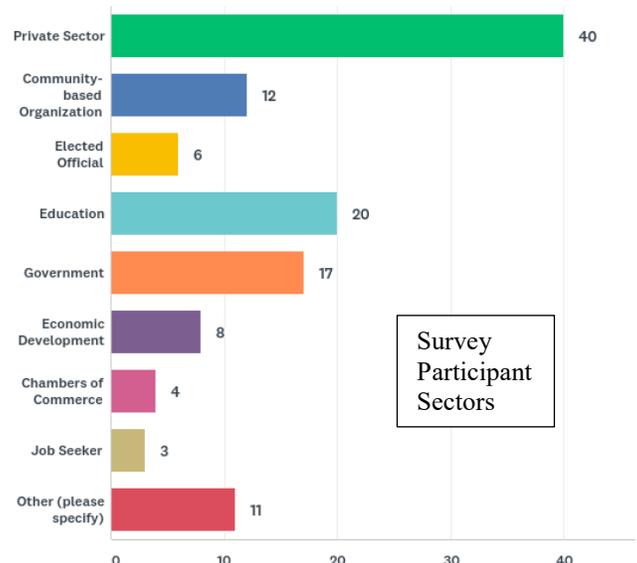
There are specific WIOA required priorities: 1) address reducing educational skills training and employment disparities and 2) build employer-led sector partnerships that provide greater opportunities and expand the talent pipeline to be inclusive of age, race, disability, disconnected youth, and gender. The staff has identified strategies that align with these required priorities including:

- Increasing services/outcomes for individuals experiencing employment disparities
- Increasing the number of employers engaged in sector-based career pathways, career awareness, work-based learning, and training opportunities

STAKEHOLDER INSIGHTS

Workforce Survey and Regional Forums

A broad group of 104 stakeholders completed a survey to help the WDB gain initial insights about key demographic and workforce realities in the region facing and the ways in which the Workforce Development Board might address needs and challenges. In addition, nearly 100 stakeholders met in person to share insights at two regional forums; one held in Slayton and one in Granite Falls, Minnesota. Both forums were well represented by employers.



Trends and Influencers

Survey Insights

Recognizing that there are several regional demographics that might influence the strategic priorities of the WDB, survey participants reflected on some of these and indicated to what extent (not at all to a great extent) they might influence priorities in the next 12 to 24 months. The following influencers, listed as ranked (from greatest to least) by survey participants were:

1. Workforce skill gaps
2. Limited awareness/exposure to local careers and jobs by students, teachers, and parents
3. Youth out-migration
4. Growing cultural diversity
5. Baby Boomer Retirements
6. Employment/education disparities for under-served population

Cameron Macht, Regional Analysis & Outreach Manager with the Minnesota Department of Employment & Economic Development (DEED), provided forum participants with a better understanding of Southwest Minnesota's labor market. Information shared is available on request on the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council's [website](#).

Group discussions indicated that the following information stood out when considering the labor market information and key trends/influencers:

- Information affirms the challenge of a tight labor market that isn't likely to improve in the near future
- With such limited numbers of available workers, all strategies are opportunities. The survey participants as well as those attending the forums highlighted strategies such as...
 - Retaining more of our youth
 - Encouraging older workers to stay in jobs longer
 - Ensuring workers acquire the skills needed for the jobs in the region; filling gaps
 - Ensuring employers are aware of opportunities through immigration

PRIORITIES and STRATEGIES

Survey participants and those who attended the workforce forums, almost unanimously indicated that the current overarching goals are the right priorities for the WDB to focus on over the next 12 to 24 months. Participants in the survey ranked strategies and partnerships that expose youth to regional careers highest with work-based learning strategies and career pathway approaches ranking high as well.



Participants in the forums reviewed the WDB's current goals/strategies and considered what is working well, what changes might enhance the efforts of the WDB; and what priorities may be missing. Based on discussions and survey insights, the following insights surfaced to a great degree:

What is Working Well

- **Strong collaboration and partnerships between businesses and schools is effective** - expanded work with schools to provide career awareness/exposure of local jobs; role of Career Navigator has been key to this work; expanded partnerships between schools, employers, Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council and Minnesota West Community and Technical College.
- **The “Know Before You Go” campaign** to education students/parents on labor market and education information for key regional occupations.
- **Work-based Learning** - Increase opportunities for employer/student connections.
- **Career Pathway programs** for focused industries including Health Care, Manufacturing, Transportation, and Construction/Trades.
- **Industry specific meetings** - to gain insights from employers in top labor industries and build employer partnerships.
- **Pipeline Program** – use of funding to address skills gaps.
- **Earn and Learn programs** as a pipeline strategy and for reducing disparities.
- **Targeted outreach** for pathway training/services to under-served populations.

KEY INSIGHTS RELATED TO ENHANCING CURRENT AND DEVELOPING NEW GOALS/STRATEGIES

Awareness/Exposure of Regional Jobs is Key – strong emphasis on ensuring that students, parents and teachers know what jobs are available in the region, how to prepare for them, and understand cost comparisons of education/earning potential to help guide students in their career pathways.

Potential Strategies:

- Continue to expand on the work to bring students and employers together; role of Career Pathway Navigator has been critical to the success thus far.
- Develop a required Careers Class and Exploration System for all 7th through 12th grade students
- Create incentives and support for youth and young adults to entice them to stay/return.
- Developed focused communication to/engagement of parents as key influencers on youth.

Students need mentors to help them explore and gain real-world experience in regional occupations AND businesses need mentors to help them understand the programs and how they might best engage with students.

Employer Engagement/Partnerships are Essential

– The increased collaboration between education and industry has been enhanced greatly through the work of the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council and the Workforce Development Board. This should be a continued focus.

Potential strategies:

- Greater employer awareness of workforce programs/resources and a better understanding of the opportunities and benefits of working with youth.
- Increased collaboration to explore ways to address workforce retention and recruitment – working together to develop and implement new strategies to retain current workers including the older workforce and young adults.

“Just listening today, there are so many different programs and resources. As an employer, I don’t have time to wade through it all.”

Comprehensive Marketing and Communications Efforts are Needed – All programs and offerings need a more structured marketing/promotion plan that includes targeted outreach to specific audiences such as students, parents, educators, employers, city/chambers, etc.

Parents are Key Influencers – Along with exposure and awareness for students, we must reach parents.

Potential Strategies:

- Work to include parents in increased connections with employers through involvement in business tours and programs like CEO
- Add assignments for students to show parents videos/reports
- Personally invite parents to business open houses/career expos

75% of students recently surveyed say family is their top influencer on career choices. We need to help parents gain an improved perspective of career opportunities available in the region.

Cultural Diversity and Under-served Populations - Recognition that effective strategies may be more effective if adjusted based on locality. For example, aging and diversity demographics vary from community to community and therefore the priorities to address the needs of each community may need to be adjusted accordingly. Potential Strategies:

- In communities with greater cultural diversity address the language barrier by increasing ESL and increase outreach to parents/community leaders to gain buy-in
- Adapt existing programs based on cultural differences to ensure efforts are culturally effective
- Share labor data with employers to expose data-driven need for immigration

“The WDB could share data regarding why rural communities NEED immigrant workers.”

Addressing the Skills Gap – Mention of missing the skill set at mid-level (younger workers not ready for management responsibilities; older workers in management ready to retire or shift to fewer responsibilities. Also, continue to encourage trade certificates and 2-year programs in the region and implement Earn & Learn models.

Better Communication/Collaboration – Participants mentioned numerous discussions taking place around the workforce shortage is still happening in silos – education and business; economic development and business; workforce agencies and business. Stronger collaboration to get broad representation from the full community together to build strategies and then determine who is best suited to address each?

“We’re at meetings like this frequently, but not all of the players are here. We need ALL at the table at the same time.”

Insights that may expand beyond the scope of the WDB...

- **Regional Recruitment** – Interest in seeing more regional efforts to recruit people to the region. Although this may not fall within the scope of work for the WDB, it is important to note the interest of the private sector in outreach and marketing to college students and young families who may be interested in returning to the region.
- **Advocacy for Educational Reform and Funding** – Discussions indicated a desire to advocate for state-level changes to graduation requirements and school course/schedules to allow more flexibility in education to include hands-on learning, career exploration and work-based learning opportunities.

CLOSING

We are very grateful for the tremendous response and engagement of employers, educators, and other partners as we work to develop the goals and strategies for meeting the workforce needs of the region. Additional insights and recommendations gathered through regional forums will be used to further develop priorities. Questions pertaining to this work should be addressed to Carrie Bendix, Executive Director of the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council at cbendix@swmnpic.org or (507) 476-4067.