**Executive Summary**

Education has found itself in a stagnant state for several decades in rural Minnesota. This has perhaps been especially true in vocational/technical education. In 2013 under Minnesota Statute, Section 120B.11, the legislature and in turn, the governor, issued a new mandate to public schools to create the World’s Best Workforce. Using this mandate as motivation, individuals in Marshall, Minnesota blazed an innovative trail, creating a grass roots program called the “Marshall Adult/Youth Career Training” that brings together partners from multiple spectrums of the community and region to provide vocational/technical training in an integrated setting for high school students, college students and adults from all socioeconomic levels. The partnership behind this project is comprised of Workforce partners (primarily the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council—PIC—a critical partner branch in the Marshall area), Adult Basic Education (ABE), the Marshall Public School District, and Minnesota West Community and Technical College (MN West).

Regarding the successful direction of career pathway programming in Southwest MN, Judy Mortrude, Senior Policy Analyst at the *Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success* recently said

"Research continues to build the case for programs that integrate foundational education and skills training with career navigation and support services, aka career pathways.  The Southwest Minnesota community is leading the way in creating a career pathway system accessible for youth and adults that results in individual education and economic mobility and a stronger regional economic competitiveness."

The project started very simply with one Certified Nursing Assistant (CAN) health care program and then added a welding vocational program. Planning has begun for a third vocational program. Initially, creation of this model was a response to realize cost efficiencies; however, as the model moves forward, there have been even greater benefits:

* Collaboration of workplace and academic organizations to provide an effective model for addressing community/regional education and employment needs.
* Removal of academic/personal obstacles that prevent adult and youth students from entering a career pathway and having the potential to move beyond entry-level positions.
* Multi-generational classes that promote youth acting more maturely and respectfully while in the presence of adult students.
* Increased opportunity for youth who do not qualify for Post Secondary Education Options (PSEO)

Nola Speiser, Director of Adult Career Pathways at the *MN Department of Employment and Economic Development* believes that this multigenerational, cohort-based model is an example of a best practice in career pathway programming: “Students have the ability to learn and grow from each other’s experiences, which strengthens the likelihood of successful employment. In addition, this model proves cost effective by leveraging and aligning multiple funding streams.”

The body of the white paper is broken into two parts:

* An explanation of how the grass roots vocational/educational training program was developed and how it is sustained, including the formation of partnerships, financing, trust, and the empowerment of all partners to help reach a common goal for all students involved in the program.
* An articulation of the development of a model framework to determine the feasibility of replicating this program in other communities (stage one), and two stages for expansion.

**Creating Sustainable Vocational/Technical Training Programs**

**Eliminating Training SILOS**

**An Accelerated Disruption – The Beginning to Today**

**Partners**

In 2013, the reality that the educational process for certain groups from high school to adult students was not working financially for the potential partners became evident. The segregated educational model for each group of individuals needing vocational/technical training and the development of readiness skills was not financially sustainable long-term in Marshall. Fortunately, the potential partners in Marshall had only one goal: to serve and help those needing training. Therefore, the public schools and ABE joined forces and followed the principles described by Lefkosky’s term “accelerated disruption,”1. In the spring of 2014, a model to offer adult/youth services career training during fall 2014 was initially discussed. With the aid of a Youth Competitive Grant from PIC, this adult/youth training concept was initiated in the summer, earlier than originally planned.

The major breakthrough was the understanding that to obtain the critical mass of students that needed both vocational/technical training and readiness development, an integrated model – a model including individuals of all ages from all socio-economic levels – was required. While postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) is available for high school students through public schools, this program has eligibility requirements that generally allow enrollment only for students who are performing at higher academic levels. Students who may not meet the academic requirements are were not able to access PSEO courses or have as many opportunities to do so as their peers. Adult Basic Education staff and the Marshall School District had a vision to allocate and use other funding methods to serve everyone, youth and adults, who would in turn be likely to seek employment in the Marshall area. The Marshall School District invested in equipment, staff costs, materials, and space to start the CNA and welding courses with college credit available through MN West. These program costs were taken out of the General Fund of the Public School for youth and a variety of financial resources were used for the adults. . These initial conversations created trust and ideas for how to fund the program.

Conversations, at first in random meetings and later as a coordinated effort, began to bear fruit as a grass roots movement started to take shape, going beyond the traditional boundaries of segregated groups needing education and training. These talks eventually took place between PIC staff, ABE, the Marshall Area School District, MN West, and local employers.

First came recognition of the need to develop programs in which an obvious and pressing employment demand had reached a critical deficit of workers. The need for health care workers had exploded as the first baby boomers passed into their 60s. Largely because of this shortage of workers, local employers became willing partners in the program-planning process. MN West partnered to provide the certificate/college credits to allow the individual to enter the workforce. ABE partnered to provide assessments to assure potential students could master content, instruction to raise areas of weakness, pre-instruction to prepare the individual to take the college class, and support during the college class to assure success. Finally, Workforce partners agreed to provide employment skills and career counseling. Most importantly, students participating began see career pathways into the future with training taking place close to home. Moving from a historical “silo mentality” (isolation mentality) of training to one that integrated several agencies and employers within the community was initially not an easy process and continues to be a work in progress today

Throughout the initial process, much was accomplished by trial and error. Because the trust level among partners had been nurtured over the first months and years of development, disagreements were viewed as learning opportunities for improvement. Curriculum was developed—with employer input—to fit the needs of the students and the employers so that success was the only option.

The college had a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) curriculum, ABE had the wraparound services (including spending extra time with an individual if he/she was struggling academically with the CNA curriculum plus upgrading math, computer, and reading skills,), and Workforce partners had the capacity to provide employability skills, make arrangements for employers’ plans, provide navigator services, and connecting the individual with resources to address barriers such as transportation and child care. The School District had a desire to serve students and a location for the program. Employers had a shortage of health care workers. Consequently, all partners had a stake in, and need for, the initial program.

**Financing**

The project is funded through a variety of programs including DEED, PIC, ABE general funds, and school district general funds. Funding levels of the different organizations change with adjustments in funding through outside grants. The cost to run the training is determined by estimating instructional cost, material cost and rent. The factor that determines who funds what is the number of students from each category: high school, ABE, college or individual adults. Essentially, all costs are added together and divided by the number of students (no matter what age) to reach a “per student cost”.

This method has proved to be simple, but solid, for startup purposes. Given the school district and ABE are the primary sources of students, these partners have carried much of the costs during the initial years, though the funding through DEED and PIC has also been crucial to the project.

Due to a 2016 legislative change that will allow ABE to be reimbursed for CNA training if an individual is successfully employed at a long-term nursing facility, the CNA career track is even more viable and sustainable.

**Curriculum**

The initial program (CNA) was intentionally structured to ensure the success of the students. The CNA curriculum design and content are built to meet the state requirements and are provided through MN West. Local employers provide training sites for clinical and practical experiences. Nonetheless, simply offering this curriculum does not guarantee a successful outcome.

The design of the entire program curriculum demands a parallel track to the CNA academic curriculum, as is required for ABE students and students participating through the Workforce Development (PIC) system. A pre-health care preparation program and on-going sessions to ensure success both during and after completion of the CNA class are part of the curriculum. These sessions include assessments; assistance in reading, math and computer use; orientation to various web sources; a financial education component; and career scope assessments.

As part of the process, students are counseled by the Career Pathway Navigator and PIC Youth staff on employability skills, including resume building and interviewing skills. In addition, financial resources are available to provide support services to assist in overcoming identified barriers such as transportation, tools, etc.

All of the resources and supports have been created through 10+ years of FastTRAC/Career Pathway design and partnership. The goal is that the CNA position need not be as far as an individual can go due to limited skills. The approach is holistic in moving students forward by providing gateway skills to open doors to further careers and removing potential obstacles to their career pathways.

Finally, the student is required to sign a program agreement. The student is given the same experience as if being hired into a new job. Outlining clear expectations of the student helps the program form a foundation for the student as he/she prepares to enter the workforce.

**Location**

The Marshall Area Technical Education Center (MATEC) run by the school district is the host site of the program.

**Program History and Development**

During the 2013-14 academic year, ABE, the SW MN PIC Youth Workforce Program and the Marshall Area School district began planning for the integrated training program for high school students, college students and adults. Other partners joined the project as planning progressed. During the summer of 2014, the first CNA class began. Welding was added to the course inventory in the fall of 2014. Today a manufacturing course is being developed for implementation in the near future, although diesel/auto mechanics and hospitality management have also been discussed due to the needs in the region and opportunities for students.

Since the summer of 2014, 38 youth students and 62 adult students have gone through the CNA program, and 17 youth students and 10 adult students have participated in the welding program. The programs are structured so that students receive college credits, allowing them to build educational blocks necessary to ensure career pathways. The CNA program awards 3 college credits upon successful completion and the welding program awards up to 16 credits upon successful completion.In both programs, high school students have the benefit of earning credits toward their high school diploma, along with college credits, regardless of their academic level or grade point average.

**A Road Map to Eliminating Educational Silos**

This section is designed to identify a road map to replicate the integrated youth/adult vocational/technical educational program located in Marshall, MN and to lay out a pathway to increase the number of curricula initially offered in the Marshall program. A first important step that program planners must take in building a roadmap for a successful program replication is to address a specific set of parameters. Prior to discussion of these parameters, a shared understanding that the program must be completely under local control acting under applicable Minnesota law is essential.

**Setting Parameters**

The most important parameter for creation of a successful and sustainable program is to identify one or two individuals who can “champion” the concept within the service area. While strong support and belief in the project is needed from a school superintendent, a workforce council director, a college president, or a CEO of a company in need of trained employees, they alone cannot carry the project into the weeds of a program operating system. Identification of one or two individuals with a passion to work with both adults and youth in an integrated setting is necessary, keeping in mind that the program purpose is to create a gateway to career pathways.

The determination of the service area is a second important parameter. The size of the service area is a factor in creating a sustainable program where students can be successful. Because the program is targeting a gateway to career pathways curricula in vocational/technical classifications, program planners must define a service area where adult students have a reasonable expectation of being able to access the established curriculum. Additionally, program planners must identify a service area with a sufficient youth student base that would find the desired curriculum as attractive and attainable. Satisfying both the adult and youth component is challenging but important, and may require multiple school districts in rural areas within a reasonable transportation radius for the adult population. In summary, the service area is determined by employment needs, travel distance, the ability to reach a critical mass of students, and willing partners in business and industry.

Identifying an initial curriculum that is attractive with a high probability of post-completion employment or a pathway to further education is a third essential parameter. Thus, there is no “one-size-fits-all” curriculum to be offered initially, but rather a specific curriculum that fits the service area. A curriculum match results from consideration of local employee needs, employer/business needs, curriculum facility and equipment requirements, and curriculum operating costs.

Consider the following examples of potential communities with a need for gateway curriculum that fits a specific service area:

* communities with medical facilities, nursing homes, or rehab centers with a continuing need for students to enter health career pathways
* communities with vocational/technical institutions within the MnSCU system that include manufacturing or fabricating businesses
* communities with school systems with industrial technology equipment complimentary to various manufacturing segments present

Each community would need to define its employment needs and curricula that are financially feasible.

A fourth parameter is to have public and private entities be willing to commit to a financial commitment of at least three years. Three years are needed to overcome the initial chaos of bringing two training groups together – youth and adults; to allow for at least three annual training cycles to be completed; to compile data on successful program completion and employment placement or continuing education; and to allow for the establishment of a program organizational structure that fits the community.

Finally, the last parameter is to have in place a *plan, do, check, revise* cycle. This cycle must be put in place to insure the credibility of the program. Furthermore, as a program approaches year three, the major decision makers will be looking to evaluate whether to continue the program, expand the program, or eliminate the program. Information and data are crucial to making valid and sound decisions that both the public and private sector will demand.

**Year Three**

During years one and two, the program needs the flexibility of thinking to change at a moment’s notice, somewhat akin to chaos theory2 or principles allowing for accelerated disruption. Initially, there is no one right way to move to the next stage, but rather a process of bringing together divergent views of K-12, college, dislocated workers, underemployed and under-served populations, ABE, and private sector desires. This process is one of learning to give and take outside of a comfort zone. By the end of two years, the training silos should be broken down, and this shared change within the collaborative model sets the stage for an operational paradigm shift in vocational/technical training. The test of a successful collaboration to de-silo training agencies is that within the scope of the joint project, each agency operates differently than when operating in its independent training silo.

Several tasks need to be accomplished in year three:

* establishment of a decision making board and an advisory board
* formulation of mission and vision statements
* development of a strategic plan for the program including sub-plans for curriculum expansion, funding, facilities and staffing

A new independent decision-making board (governing board) comprised of leaders of participating entities is absolutely essential. Leaders may include the local school district superintendent, the appropriate two-year college president, the workforce council director, the ABE director (if an independent entity), and private sector CEOs representing curriculum areas. This board is the policy board and friend-making board. While each of these members have boards to answer to, a commitment to serve on this board signifies to administrators, staff and community that this program has meaning and ensures that each organization has a significant investment in the program.

Supporting this board is an advisory board comprised of individuals close to the program. These individuals come from within the organizational structure of the agencies or businesses represented on the decision-making board and represent both the public and private sector. The advisory board’s key function is to develop processes and procedures to operationalize curricula offered within the program. One additional consideration is the inclusion of advocate groups for those key segments of the population to be served by the programs.

In the transition from year two to three, the advisory board needs to formally identify the understood or written mission and vision statements that have evolved during the first two years of the project. Then, mission and vision statements should be formally approved by the governing board prior to the start of the strategic-planning process or as part of the strategic planning process.

The final core accomplishment in year three should be the development of a strategic plan for the program. The development of a strategic plan requires several steps to be successful, and the choice of a strategic plan facilitator and author by the governing board as recommended by the advisory board is an initial step. The advisory board should be the strategic plan working committee

Strategic plan development starts with the collection of relevant data to the service area. Data should be collected through focus groups comprised of business and industry community members, partner agency members, high school students, college-age students, and other adult students. Focus group representation from all socio-economic levels is vital. Forming and collecting data from focus groups is a time-consuming process, but without seeking input from all program stakeholders, the long-term success of the program is hampered.

**Year Four and Beyond:**

In year four, the strategic plan is the guiding force. Goals and objectives are set for program years four through six. At the end of each year, the *plan, do, check, revise* cycle should be formally presented to the governing board for the purpose of revising goals and objectives as the program moves forward.

**Conclusion:**

The program underway in Marshall, Minnesota, is an exciting experiment breaking down the traditional silos that have segregated training by age. In today’s rapidly changing economic and social environment, a need exists to create gateway programs to careers for all socio-economic levels and all age groups within a community. Response to this need requires the development of a new training paradigm in which high school students, college students, dislocated workers and other adults are exposed to a variety of gateway career opportunities under one roof!

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1 **Accelerated Disruption**: **A business theory of rapid change in which businesses in an industry either change rapidly to new ideas or are pushed to the side. http://www.accelerateddisruption.com/**

2 **Chaos Theory: A theory that states that decisions are made in a non-linear fashion.**