



The Conference Board  
of Canada

#### CASE STUDY 19

*A core product of the  
Employability Skills  
Forum, National  
Business and  
Education Centre*

#### **Program**

*Business-education  
partnership*

#### **Date Established**

1995

#### **Contact**

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#### **Name of Program**

*Southwest Regional  
School Board's  
School-to-Work  
Transition Project*

#### **Skills Developed**

- *Academic*
- *Personal  
Management*
- *Teamwork*

Developing secondary school students' employability skills

# SOUTHWEST REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD'S TRANSITIONS PROJECT

## *Developing Secondary School Students' Employability Skills*

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

Southwest Regional School Board is developing its secondary school students' employability skills to help them make the transition to the world of work or postsecondary education.

#### **Overview**

Southwest Regional School Board's School-to-Work Transition Project (SWT) partners education, business and the community to develop secondary school students' employability skills. It thus improves students' abilities to make the transition from school to work. Students learn the habits of self-command and adaptability and the generic skills they need to get and keep a job in the changing world of work or to pursue postsecondary education.

The Southwest Regional School Board is piloting SWT in Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School. Yarmouth Consolidated recognized the benefit of exposing students to workplace realities as a way of complementing the academic channelling that takes place in the school environment. However, the school first had to decide how to balance the workplace and classroom components of the project. Yarmouth Consolidated, anxious to immerse

students as fully as possible in a workplace environment, settled on an 80–20 split.

The school guidance counsellor has observed that students and their parents are more concerned than ever about finding and keeping a job, and school career activities include an annual career expo.

The guidance counsellor recommends SWT as an excellent opportunity for middle-range students (i.e., those who are neither over- nor under-achievers) to acquire work experience in a structured setting to help them make job plans or career decisions.

#### **Objectives**

- Develop students' employability skills.
- Help secondary school students make more informed choices about their plans for further education and employment.
- Make classroom learning more relevant to students by linking it more closely with workplace realities.
- Open up mutually beneficial communications channels between educators and employers.
- Make training in highly skilled occupations more accessible to students.

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## Groups Served

- Students, employers, educators, parents and community.

## Activities

A management committee composed of representatives from all stakeholders, including business, educators, parents and students, guides and directs the work of the SWT. Under their direction, two cohorts of students have participated in SWT. The first cohort, consisting of 16 Grade 11 students, started SWT in the 1995–96 academic year. At the midpoint of the 1996–97 year, 9 students, by this time in their Grade 12 year, were still in the program. The second cohort, consisting of 20 Grade 11 students, started SWT in the 1996–97 academic year. Five students, now in their Grade 12 year, are continuing in the program.

### First Cohort

The first cohort received 90 hours of classroom-based education (outside regular school hours) (60 hours in Grade 11 and 30 hours in Grade 12) and 350 hours of work experience (150 hours in Grade 11 and 200 hours in Grade 12).

Grade 11 in-school programming included extensive career counselling, self- and occupational-awareness training, instruction in goal-setting, practical training (e.g., first aid, food handling, business machines/computers) and advice on how to find and keep a job.

Grade 12 in-school programming built on the skills learned in Grade 11 and focused on computers and information management, financial and retirement planning, workplace safety, the global economy and making the transition from home to work. Programming in both grades was delivered by the project co-ordinator, employers and others.

Participating students also got significant work experience after school and on evenings and weekends in their work placements.

The in-school component was worth 20 per cent of the overall mark students

received for their participation in SWT, and their learning experiences in both Grades 11 and 12 were assessed on the basis of a combination of:

- attending learning sessions, keeping a log of the courses they attended and writing a report about what they learned after each structured learning session, and
- keeping a journal of their workplace experiences.

The remaining 80 per cent of their grade was based on a comparison of employers' evaluations of students' employability skills with students' own assessments of their skills using a standardized Nova Scotia Department of Education evaluation form. The comparisons were made in the presence of the students concerned.

This was a subjective evaluation that assessed students' employability skills and allowed employers to add skills that were developed but not listed on the printed form. The form asked students and employers to rate students' generic employability and job-specific skill levels and to develop individualized skills development plans for students.

The project co-ordinator also made a personal assessment of the learning experiences of students in the first cohort on the basis of interviews conducted in the workplace with students and their supervisors. The co-ordinator factored into his calculations his own assessments of students' dealings with him, as effective communication between co-ordinator and employers depended on how forthcoming students were in discussing work placement problems with the co-ordinator.

### Second Cohort

The second cohort received 86 hours of classroom-based instruction over Grades 11 and 12 and 350 hours of work experience. In the second cohort, certain in-class sessions used with the first cohort were modified in light of recommendations from the first cohort. As well, the project co-ordinator

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We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

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attempted to locate employers based on students' interests; this had not been done for the first cohort. Students in the second cohort were evaluated in the same way as their counterparts in the first cohort were.

### Resources Required

- Approximately \$50,000 per year. The single largest expense is the salary of a project co-ordinator.
- Other hard costs included in the \$50,000 above are about \$3,500 per year to cover certain programming (e.g., Super Host, CPR, career exploration consultant).

### Achievements/Outcomes

After completing their first year of postsecondary education, graduates of SWT have reported how much they benefited from taking the course, noting that it makes a big difference to the way they perceive things. Students frequently discover that they do not want to pursue a career in a field in which they have always been interested. However, they also discover new areas of interest in which they definitely want to work. One person, for example, was interested in pharmacology, but found that while she did not like the pharmacy aspects of her work placement, she did like the business aspects. Instead of pursuing medicine, she is now pursuing commerce in her postsecondary studies.

### Benefits

#### Students

- Develop employability skills, especially personal management and teamwork skills to complement their academic education while earning their diploma.
- Indicate that their newly acquired employability skills enhance their classroom performance. Low-end and middle-range achievers improve their secondary school averages (by as much as 7 per cent) by taking SWT.
- Test out their career interests against their experience of what they like and do not like to do.

- Are exposed to non-teacher-dependent learning, which reinforces the notion that learning is a lifelong process that continues beyond the classroom.
- Learn how to take more responsibility for their actions.
- Gain work experience, earn income (in Grade 12) and perceive the relevance of their academic studies.

#### Employers

- Get an opportunity to prescreen and educate future employees.
- Provide their own staff with opportunities to develop their skills.

#### Educators

- Enhance their capacity to relate the subjects they teach to workplace realities.
- Gain access to more instructional resources.

#### Innovation

SWT moves the locus of teaching and the management of instruction from educators to employers. In the Grade 12 portion of SWT, employers develop the out-of-school curricula, and the work placements accepted by the students determine the content of the instruction they receive within the school.

#### Keys to Success

- Supporting students as they learn to work independently and take responsibility for their actions.
- Having employers who understand the challenges of taking a student for a work placement and appreciate the benefits of training a person for a summer job through SWT.
- Ensuring that classroom work pertinent to work placements is done before students embark on their work placements.
- Ensuring that students buy into SWT—this may mean excluding from the program students who are habitually late for, or skip, school on the assumption that they will exhibit the same behaviour in their work placements.

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*Our grateful thanks to our interviewee:*

*Ernie Parkes*

- Having an in-service day for educators in the workplace to give them an understanding of workplace realities and a starting point for relating the subjects they teach back to their students' experiences.

### Greatest Challenges

Perhaps the greatest challenge for SWT is linking the in-school component of the program directly with the workplace one, thereby integrating SWT with the regular school curriculum. To this end, educators need in-service training to ensure that they understand the learning objectives of SWT and are given practical assistance in relating workplace learning with classroom instruction. Such training may require a shift in emphasis from a classroom-only-based learning model to a recognition and appreciation of the prevalence and importance of non-traditional learning venues and delivery vehicles.

It may be desirable to offer the program in Grades 10 and 11 rather than in Grades 11 and 12. Students observed that the pressure to get good grades in Grade 12 to meet entrance requirements for postsecondary education makes it difficult for them to devote sufficient time and energy to the SWT program.

Students were disappointed that they were not given the opportunity to discuss their work placements during the in-school component of SWT. They were also frustrated when presenters' workshops ended up being like classroom instruction—they expected a more interactive

format appropriate to the perceived relevance of the workshop material.

Regular meetings between students and the project co-ordinator might help students to reflect on and understand their work experiences and take stock of skills developed and lessons learned. Parents might also be consulted on a regular basis to gather their perceptions of their children's progress in SWT and to further extend the community partnership aspect of the program. Moreover, the expectations of the students themselves must be more broadly canvassed and co-ordinated with the expectations of educators, employers, parents and the community. Steps will be taken in 1998–99 to address many of these issues.

Grade 12 students in the first cohort were responsible for finding their own job placements, which created a disjunction between their employers and the program. On the other side, employers should be encouraged to make their expectations clear to the students they sponsor, as students in the second cohort observed.

To improve the evaluation of students' learnings and the development of their skills, it will be important to give more purpose to communication between the project co-ordinator and employers—both should be co-ordinating their efforts to assess and develop students' skills in defined areas. Presenters' delivery of material and assessment techniques might also be made more learner-centred by considering how learners can demonstrate their grasp of the session materials, and by stipulating performance criteria to measure their mastery of these materials.

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### NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

*Employability Skills Profile*

*Science Literacy for the World of Work*

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.*

*1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

*1997 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

*1996 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*