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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: North Carolina Education and Workforce Development: Work Ready Communities

By CED Program Interns & Students

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A powerful common denominator between economic development and human

capital development is education. Communities with well-regarded schools incentivize businesses to be recruited to an area to make use of local talent. It is a cycle in which the economic vitality of an area is contingent upon the strength of local schools, using indicators such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, educational attainment, school report cards, and school performance grades. This puts a heavy emphasis on the presentation of those metrics. But contextually, what is missed by these traditional indicators? What other educational measures can be leveraged to emphasize the preparedness of the workforce in an area? Additional considerations may come into play.

Hypothetical: Sunnyside is a town located in Some County, North Carolina. The county was hit hard by the loss of once vibrant manufacturing industry that sustained a period in which the median county income was above the state average between the 1980's and early 2000's. In the wake of the 2008 recession the county was designated as a Tier 1 county, but as of 2015 the county rose to a less economically distressed Tier 2 designation.

Sunnyside High School is the largest school in Some County, with an enrollment total of around 2,000 students. As of 2016, the school has a graduation rate of 80%, offers various courses including several dual enrollment classes and 12 Advanced Placement courses, and earned a school performance grade of "C" in school year 2015-2016 due to overall poor End of Course, ACT, and Math III test results. In addition, 80% of Sunnyside High School students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

An important factor that distinguishes Sunnyside High School from similar schools throughout the state is Some County's designation as a NCWorks Certified Work Ready Community and its performance on ACT WorkKeys exams. In a collaborative effort, the Office of the Governor, the North Carolina Chamber Foundation, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Community College System Office, and the North Carolina Department of Commerce took initiative to create a system to promote investments in human capital and workforce development for students in North Carolina. This initiative "supports economic development by providing a workforce with documented foundational skills. Other benefits include competitive cost models through lower employee turnover, decreased training time and costs, and related efficiencies that enhance North Carolina's global competitiveness." Students in participating high schools are required to achieve a high level of proficiency with ACT WorkKeys exams and ACT Career Ready Certificates (NCRC) to earn certification as a Work Ready Community.



Students with accreditation have shown competency within their respective Career and Technical Education tracts. Over 1,800 businesses have elected to endorse this program, with more joining as the successes come into fruition. Sunnyside High, for example, has developed a program with the local community college to equip students with Computer-Aided Drafting and Design (CADD) skills; once those skills are developed, local architecture and engineering firms compete to hire the best students from the program for a salary that is above the Some County median income. This is only one example; similar relationships have been established within the school's nursing, automotive, and culinary arts programs.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to address the workforce development needs of North Carolina, the fictional Sunnyside High is a representation of what can happen if strategic investments are made in education. Individually, test scores and school performance grades are considerations businesses account for, but it is the amalgamation of attributes, such as Work Ready Community Certification and community investments in education that emphasize human capital available within an area. This challenges communities to focus on the assets of local education as opposed to exposing the liabilities of test scores; the Work Ready Community Program is one such asset. There are currently 14 North Carolina Counties that have been designated as Work Ready Communities and 42 are currently participating in the program, which means there is still room for growth.

The relationship between a high school and community college, for example can be viewed as another key asset in addressing workforce development needs within an area. The North Carolina Community College System has embraced this as an opportunity to empower and enable communities to respond to workforce demands. Part II will examine this, as well as the roles of community colleges in workforce development through public-private partnerships.

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