



Education & Workforce Development

Workforce development never stops

In this week's Thought Leadership roundtable, executives at Indiana Wesleyan University and the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township say that in spite of Indiana's robust workforce development efforts, still more must be done.

Q: How would you describe the state of Indiana's labor force in 2022?

Andy Miller: The Indiana Chamber of Commerce noted in the results of its recently published workforce survey the immense struggles with educational attainment across the state. Although education attainment is an essential indicator of worker preparedness and social mobility, the majority of Hoosiers lack post-high school education. Higher and continuing education is essential

to a strong and vibrant economy, and until Indiana improves its educational-attainment rates, there will undoubtedly be challenges in the workforce that will limit Indiana's growth as a regional and national job marketplace. Efforts in the past decade, such as NextLevel Jobs, have contributed to improvements in this area, but more coordinated efforts between the state, educational system, and employers are needed to advance the Hoosier workforce.

Shawn Smith: The post-pandemic labor force is struggling, particularly



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in the area of skilled workers. Employers must have a willingness to train new hires to meet the demands of the job. The MSD of Lawrence Township provides opportunities for students to graduate ready to enter the workforce with nationally recognized certifications that provide opportunity for employment, post-secondary education, or military service.

Q: How important a role should K-12 schools play in development of a local workforce?

Shawn Smith: Schools are integral in the development of a local workforce. College and career readiness should begin at the elementary level. We must help children identify their gifts, interests, and potential at an early age while exposing them to a variety of career opportunities. By high school, students should be applying skills to solve real world industry problems instead of doing initial industry exploration.

Andy Miller: K-12 schools serve a vital role in developing a local workforce. A principal function of the K-12 system is the discovery process that enables young people to identify and explore their areas of interest. These schools provide significant economic value for communities by highlighting the importance of different career pathways, from the skilled trades to white-collar professions. The hope is that the educational system provides these opportunities and values students, regardless of their path. We sincerely hope the K-12 system challenges the next generation to love learning, see themselves in a future career, and provide meaningful awareness and preparatory opportunities. When working in conjunction with industry and the higher education system, K-12 can make a lasting impact on students, communities, and the broader economy.

Q: To what extent should the goal of a skilled workforce dictate school curricula?

Andy Miller: Learning is about discovery, enrichment, and preparation. It is about maturing and becoming. Learning begins but does not end. In that frame, the educational system should create an environment in which learning is a life-long process that enables individuals to discover and explore areas of interest, enrich and prepare, and become the best

version of themselves. The entire educational system should align with the noble aim of maintaining an educated citizenry. At times, this alignment corresponds with workforce development objectives. In other spaces and for certain groups, school curricula are more expansive in educating the whole person. There is a place for liberal arts education, and there is a place for workforce education. Indeed, these two noble objectives should co-exist in an educational environment that values future jobs and an educated citizenry.

Shawn Smith: Programs and curriculum must be current and reflect innovative industry skills and trends. Preparation and exposure at an early age is imperative. Job availability does not necessarily translate to job acceptance. This demonstrates a marked shift from the Baby Boomer and Generation X mindset. Students require a comprehensive education that provides them with the skills needed to do any number of things. Available to all high school students in the MSD of Lawrence Township is the McKenzie Center for Innovation & Technology, offering credit-bearing programs and 15 national certifications. Every program has an advisory board of industry professionals who review curriculum annually to ensure it aligns with current best practices. These professionals also have the opportunity to engage with students and can be a source of first-hand knowledge about the demands of different career fields.

Q: How important are partnerships with the business community in workforce development?

Shawn Smith: Successful education programs leverage the support of the business community. Lawrence Township is uniquely positioned to support workforce development initiatives with its standalone McKenzie Center for Innovation & Technology, serving students from Lawrence Central and Lawrence North high schools. Using fields of study that are in demand, McKenzie offers work-based learning experiences through partnership with industry leaders in the business community, including Ed Martin Automotive Group, Community Health Network, Rolls Royce, the City of Lawrence, and more.

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Andy Miller: Partnerships are a critical component of the workforce-development ecosystem. Key parties to this work include businesses, local nonprofits, educational entities, and workforce agencies and corporations. No single party within this system can provide the full range of services needed to provide workforce solutions. The most effective workforce systems create alignment between these entities in a way that allows each to fulfill its unique mission. The partnership environment with and around the business community is essential to workforce development efforts.

Q: Education beyond high school is evolving rapidly. How should education providers respond to the real or perceived declining value of higher education?

Andy Miller: Issues of student loan debt, dissatisfaction with the educational experience, the emergence of alternative pathways, and various other factors have led to legitimate questions about higher education. Is it worth the investment? Is higher education the right “fit” for me? The truth is: College is not for everyone, nor was it intended for everyone. But higher education is critical in preparing individuals for knowledge-worker positions. There are no guarantees that a college education will provide a meaningful career, economic advantage, or social mobility. These outcomes depend, in large part, on the individual and their environment. Higher education, however, is not blameless in its waning popularity. The higher-ed sector should emphasize a quality learning experience, meaningful opportunities to apply and network, and efforts to reduce the financial burden.

Shawn Smith: Workforce development truly begins in early childhood. Schools have been in the business of workforce development for decades, supported by the state’s expansion of pathways and opportunities for graduates beyond traditional two- and

four-year colleges. Not all skilled and in-demand professions require a traditional four-year degree. Lawrence Township is proud to participate in Next Level Programs of Study, offering a host of benefits, including college credit-bearing courses, connections to meaningful employment opportunities, and transferable skills, all of which can prepare students to earn a livable wage in high-demand fields with opportunity for advancement. In a learning community as vast as ours, the definition of success and the pathway to achieve it is as diverse as our student body.

Q: Which industries are particularly challenged and need a stronger education-to-workforce pipeline?

Andy Miller: Manufacturing and education are particularly challenging industries that need creative solutions to support the workforce pipeline. Manufacturing is in growing demand throughout the Midwest as the U.S. shifts to more aggressive economic trade policies. Similarly, a multi-decade decline in teacher education and licensure is creating significant gaps in the workforce for the K-12 system. Indiana and other states are adopting alternative pathways and funding models to address workforce concerns. Strategies, such as Indiana Wesleyan University’s alternative credential programs, provide a new stream of candidates for the classroom.

Shawn Smith: In-demand industries needing a stronger education-to-workforce pipeline include the construction trades, technology, health and human services, and medical careers. To address this disconnect, the MSD of Lawrence Township intentionally invests resources to ensure both exposure and work-based learning experiences for those students who indicate interest in these fields.

Q: What are the biggest obstacles to a better-prepared Indiana workforce?

Shawn Smith: The more students are exposed to diverse program offerings and career pathways, the more they have a chance to explore their interests and determine areas of focus. Early exposure to programs can increase long-term buy-in and commitment to completion. Also needed are soft skills like punctuality, teamwork, problem solving, and effective communication.

Andy Miller: The most significant obstacle facing the Indiana workforce is the educational attainment rate of its citizens, which lags significantly behind other states. Approximately 48% of Hoosiers have an associate degree or a high-quality credential, whereas the national average is north of 51%. While a bachelor’s degree is not the prerequisite for a better-prepared worker, continuing education and skills development are critical components of an educated citizenry. At Indiana Wesleyan University, we emphasize that skills earn jobs, and degrees provide promotions.

Q: Which local workforce development initiatives do you perceive as the most successful?

Andy Miller: It is worth repeating that the future of the Indiana workforce requires tightly aligned partnerships between an array of public and private entities. A great

example is the NextLevel Jobs program, which connects job seekers with career exploration, training offerings from Indiana providers (such as the Talent Ladder), and future employment opportunities. This system aligns the funding, just-in-time skills development, and job visibility necessary for upskilling and sustaining the workforce. Serving as a marketplace of opportunity, the initiative benefits the worker, the educational provider, the employer, the state, and the economy. Also, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce and its Institute for Workforce Excellence are excellent resources for aggregating the variety of workforce development solutions across the state.

Shawn Smith: Workforce Development begins in early childhood. The MSD of Lawrence Township STEM 4 ALL initiative intentionally bolsters the existing elementary curriculum to include Project Lead the Way resources and computer science. The MSD of Lawrence Township uses Pathful Connect, a program that virtually connects teachers and students with industry experts and extends education outreach and equity of access. The district is intentional at the middle grades to engage students in career exploration, including annual participation in Junior Achievement’s JobSpark. ●



Andy Miller, PhD, serves as the vice president for innovation & partnerships at Indiana Wesleyan University. Miller establishes educational and strategic partnerships with various organizations in the Midwest, including workforce and economic development organizations, state agencies, local nonprofits, flight schools, and other educational institutions. These partnerships provide training and educational pathways to support adult learners and workforce needs.



Dr. Shawn A. Smith has served as the Superintendent of Schools for the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township since 2014. The district serves more than 16,000 students and has over 2,300 employees. Dr. Smith has 32 years of experience in the field of education and is still a passionate educator whose first love is teaching Social Studies.



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