



# Oklahoma Education At A Crossroads

Engagement Resources for the Oklahoma Business Community



Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative



## Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative

Dear Oklahoma Employer:

Our state's education system is in desperate need of change. Not because we underperform, though in most categories we do compared to other states in our region. Not because many of you can't find the workers you need to operate your business, let alone grow or expand. And not because of the projected skills gap we have to fill Oklahoma's future jobs.

Change is needed because our kids deserve the very best chance of having a successful life with a good paying job to help them support a family right here in Oklahoma. Right now, we have high-paying jobs sitting empty because too often we are graduating students without the skills needed in a modern workforce. They can't read a ruler, or write a complete sentence on a job application. They can't show up for work on time and don't realize that welding isn't the dirty manufacturing job it used to be.

We don't talk about change to be negative; quite the contrary. As a business community, we understand Oklahoma's potential. We know our students deserve the very best education system and right now we fall far short of providing that opportunity.

You are business leaders, but also parents, community members, mentors and simply concerned citizens. Our students need you.

As a business, you are likely not finding the workers with skills you need to do today's work, let alone tomorrow's. You have just as much responsibility for this problem as anyone else in our state. This challenge isn't any one group's fault, and not one group can solve it. It will take a collective effort to give our students opportunities to succeed.

We can't keep pointing our finger at the education establishment and wondering why change isn't coming. When your business must adapt to changing markets, do you wait for someone else to make the move? Business understands adaptability, and we have a lot to offer the education reform discussion.

If you can't find the workers you need, or if you fear you won't be able to in the future, you have an obligation to get involved. It is time for our state to stop settling for mediocrity and demand better results. Every single one of our kids are worthy of a shot at their dream job.

Oklahoma's education system is in flux. We are in the process of re-writing our standards, which we sincerely hope leads to the adoption of tough, new academic standards designed to get students ready for both college and career. As the hard work of crafting rigorous standards and implementation gets underway, business support for these efforts is critical to Oklahoma's future.

We hope you will utilize this toolkit to help better align your company's philanthropic and community engagement strategies with college- and career-ready education reform and, more importantly, get more engaged in improving Oklahoma's education system. If we cannot find the workers we need, and the ones we get do not have the skills to do the jobs we have, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

Sincerely,

**Jennifer Monies**

Executive Director

Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative

Chances are, your employees and customers care deeply about education. According to a November 2014 Cole Hargrave Snodgrass & Associates poll, 26 percent of Oklahoma voters say improving education is the single most important issue to them, far out-distancing other important issues like creating jobs (16 percent) defending traditional values (13 percent) or stopping federal overreach (12 percent). More than any other issue, those polled said improving public education should be at the top of the list.

## What Can Businesses Do?

Oklahoma's business community is making strategic investments in education. These investments take many different forms, as highlighted in the following pages—from philanthropic donations to op-ed articles, from small-scale internship placements to extensive public/private partnerships such as Oklahoma's successful early childhood education program.

Businesses can send an important signal about their priorities by supporting college- and career-readiness. This kit contains resources, examples, and ideas designed to help you:

- Think strategically about your company's support for education
- Share information with your employees
- Take your message into the community and to your policymakers
- Work directly with local schools
- Utilize included opinion pieces to craft your own message in your local media

## Think Strategically About Your Company's Support for Education

Issues to consider:

- What are you currently doing to support education and the workforce of tomorrow? If you haven't yet forged a strategy, now is the perfect time.
- Is your strategy focused on preparing students for college and future careers, or does it merely reinforce the status quo?
- Does your strategy make clear to your community partners, grantees, and employees that your focus is on college- and career-readiness?
- Does it promote your company's long-term interests?



## Ways to Get Involved

**Learn more:** Meet with your human resources office to learn about the specific challenges your company is facing in recruiting qualified candidates. Ask for data that will help you prepare for upcoming meetings regarding your company's education strategy. Prepare specific suggestions about how your company can best support college- and career-ready efforts in Oklahoma and your community.

**Brief your team:** Pull together the people from across your company who are responsible for education investments, school partnerships, employee volunteerism, communications, and government affairs. Brief them on college- and career-readiness reform efforts, making sure to explain why the reforms benefit your company. Consider inviting a local educator to join the conversation.

**Draft the strategy:** Engage the team to design a comprehensive strategy that focuses available resources on college and career readiness.

**Communicate the strategy—then use it:** Brief company leaders on the new strategy, gain their feedback, and build support. Share the strategy companywide and with external education partners. Use the strategy to guide decisions.

## Share Information With Your Employees

**Key message:** Tomorrow's workforce is in today's classrooms. They are your future colleagues. For some of you, they are your children. It is imperative that they graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge that prepare them for college and careers.

### Strategies:

- Write about education in your company newsletter or listserv. One of the easiest steps you can take is to include news articles about local schools or districts. You can also share what your company is doing to support education. Don't assume your employees know! Once you begin to speak out, you'll find many of your employees are already active in their local schools—on school boards, as mentors, and as volunteers in their children's classrooms. This can make for great feature stories.
- When you convene or e-mail employees to talk about the company's current initiatives and future direction, make sure that senior executives highlight your college- and career-readiness strategy and how tougher standards will affect employees' children and communities. Give employees an opportunity to have their questions answered.

*Sample email to share with your employees about Oklahoma's new academic standards:*

The members of our team with school-aged children probably know this already, but we wanted to be sure all of you were aware of some exciting new developments underway in our schools. These changes hold great promise for creating a more highly-skilled workforce and for giving our students, community, and state a better foundation on which to build a strong economic future.

At the center of it all are new standards that are currently being developed that will likely require students to learn at much higher levels than in the past. The work will be harder, but the result will be better student preparation for college and the workplace.

Our business is supporting this development and will be reaching out to our community schools to find out ways we can help. If you want to know more, a good online resource can be found at [www.okeducatedworkforce.org](http://www.okeducatedworkforce.org).

Thank you.

*Sample article for possible use in your newsletter or listserv*

## **Local Schools Taking It to the Next Level**

Schools in our community and across Oklahoma will soon be working to meet the challenges of a new set of Oklahoma-based learning standards that will mean harder work but promise greater rewards for both students and the state as a whole. These tougher standards will spell out what students must learn in math and English language arts, but it will be left to your local school what curriculum is used to meet those new standards.

We have hope that the new standards will be focused on preparing students for both college and the workplace. Experts have been saying for years that students coming out of high school need to have a strong foundation of knowledge and skills—whether they plan to go on to college or try to find a job right away. Now we must translate that research into classroom reality.

We need rigorous standards tied to college and career readiness so Oklahoma students do not continue to lag behind. In 2013, on NAEP, known as the Nation's Report Card, only 30 percent of Oklahoma's 4th graders scored proficient in math. Even fewer of Oklahoma 8th graders, only 29 percent, scored proficient in reading. Oklahoma's high schools are not getting enough students even to the starting gate of college and career readiness. Only 85 percent of the class of 2013 graduated, leaving many of their classmates behind. And far too many of those go on to college are not prepared to take on the work, requiring costly remedial classes.

The bottom line for all of Oklahoma is clear, and our business is joining others across the state to express support for our schools and the hard work they are doing.

Once the new standards are implemented, we know some people may push for a return to an easier system. That is why it is important for all of us to stand up for the future and make sure business is at the table as our new standards are written and implemented.



# Take Your Message Into the Community and To Your Policymakers

**Key message:** Oklahoma's education system is going through a once-in-a-lifetime transformation, which will benefit students, teachers and employers on a systemic level. College- and Career-readiness reform initiatives will promote economic growth in your community and across Oklahoma.

## Strategies:

- Meet with your corporate communications office to find ways to work college- and career-readiness messaging into your existing communications strategy.
- Create a quick reference list to highlight your company's or industry's efforts to support college and career readiness.
- If your CEO is speaking at a community event or to a business audience, include a call to action on supporting college and career readiness in the speech.
- Before company representatives are interviewed by the media, provide talking points on the link between education reform and business growth.
- When your business meets with policymakers to discuss economic development, make sure education reform is on the agenda.
- Work with business associations, including the Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative, to identify opportunities for your company's leadership to co-author an op-ed article or sign a letter of support. Working through business associations can be a powerful way to promote education reform policies and harness the power of a collective business voice.
- Step up your engagement by hosting or sponsoring an event in your community: invite reporters to college- and career-readiness roundtables with educators and leaders from your business coalition, and work with your school district to host a college- and career-readiness information night for parents.



*Excerpt from a guest editorial written by Shawnee businessman & OEWI board member Chuck Mills, which ran in the Oklahoman on Oct. 22, 2014:*

## **Oklahoma business community needs to be involved in education system**

The business community needs to be involved in improving this state's education system. After all, having an educated workforce impacts the bottom line. The most important capital investment in every business is human capital.

Nothing is worse than having to turn away business because you have the capacity but not the people to fulfill an order. You're never going to get that back.

The simple truth is that Oklahoma's education system isn't producing the talent we need. How do we, the job creators, fix that? By getting involved. If you keep saying you're too busy or it's too complicated, the problem will never get solved.

Our future employees are in classrooms today. Make sure that they're learning the skills to get that job and a brighter future. Higher education, CareerTech, businesses and local chambers of commerce have teamed up in a few areas, such as Duncan and Shawnee, to make sure the education system is aligned to the needs of employers. We

need every community to have these collaborations, tailoring them to fit the jobs in that region.

For too long, the best and brightest were leaving Oklahoma when they graduated. We're starting to see a shift as high-paying jobs are created here. Whether it's an engineer or a welder, this state has plenty of opportunities for skilled workers. As businesses, we help fund the education system through our taxes and rely on schools for employees. Reach out to educators. Let them know what students need so that they can be ready for either college or a career when they graduate from high school.

A lot is riding on what happens in the schools and it goes beyond profits. Millions of customers around the globe rely on the resources, products and services that Oklahoma generates. Meeting that demand will require everyone taking an active role in creating a better, more productive education system.

## **Work Directly with Local Schools**

Help make college and career readiness for all students a reality in your community.

- Ask your local superintendent, school board, or school principal to describe their plan for ensuring that the new Oklahoma standards will boost student learning. We think the plan should include: clear vision of success that the community embraces; strict deadlines for important implementation milestones, such as choosing clear curriculum tied to the standards, intensive training and support for teachers, and support systems for students and parents, and explicit plans for publicly reporting progress towards that vision of success.
- Provide "real-world perspective" by speaking about the skills gap at community meetings in your school district.
- Work with your local district to develop ways for your business to support college and career readiness. Your support can range from philanthropic investments—like funding a STEM program or donating supplies for science experiments—to hands-on partnerships, like providing internships, mentorships, and job shadowing placements.

*Excerpt from an Op-Ed by Scott Meacham, president and CEO of i2E Inc. & OEWI board member that appeared in the Oklahoman on August 26, 2013*

## Education is the business of Oklahoma businesses

At i2E, when we are evaluating the promise of a new company, one of the first things we do is ask the entrepreneur and the founding team to identify the ultimate consumer of the new company's product or services. What needs does that person have? How well does the proposed business or technical solution meet those needs?

When it comes to public education, the corporations and startups in Oklahoma are the ultimate consumers. They are the ones with the jobs that they (and the graduates of our education system) want to fill.

Our business community is saying that the current education product doesn't meet their needs. Their message is clear. Whether from high school, career tech institutions, or our colleges and universities, graduates need to be more — not less — rigorously prepared.

Innovative businesses need critical thinkers. They need employees with problem solving skills. They seek workers at all levels who are trained to deal with uncertainty, who create innovation through hypotheses and experimentation.

According to performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, just 25 percent of Oklahoma's eighth-graders are proficient in math and 29 percent are proficient in reading. Some 40 percent of our high school graduates take remedial classes once they are enrolled in college because they didn't exit high school prepared for the challenges of higher education.

We'd better accept that the education of Oklahoma's young people is the business of business. We should invite input from the business community on the appropriate standards of education — that is if we want our sons and daughters to have interesting and well-paying jobs.





*Excerpt from a guest editorial by former U.S. Representative J.C. Watts:*

## **Oklahoma can't afford to settle when it comes to education**

Oklahoma should embrace this challenge as an opportunity to improve upon the past. Our students are as capable as any of mastering foundational materials, such as math and English/language arts. We must hold them to high expectations, which we know they can meet and even exceed. Oklahoma's new standards must give students the tools they need in the classroom to develop critical skills that will help them take on future challenges. By doing so, students could compete with their peers across the nation and abroad for opportunities in a rapidly changing job market. By 2022, 62 percent of jobs in Oklahoma will require an associate's degree or higher.

The new path forward asserts that no one knows what's best for Oklahoma better than Oklahomans themselves. I certainly believe the best of my fellow Oklahomans. Even so, I would encourage my fellow citizens to hold ourselves accountable and not be afraid of outside review of our work. As I've traveled around the country over the past 15 years, I've seen models of eradicating poverty and models in education with great results. It behooves us to enlist the best and brightest in the education profession with the knowledge and experience to help ensure our children enjoy the high-quality education they deserve.

We can't afford to settle when it comes to their education and future. Our policymakers have a duty to ensure we don't regress further, but instead support dedicated teachers and eager students by creating a world-class education system. Oklahoma should never be satisfied with the status quo and as the 21st-century marketplace marches forward, let's make sure Oklahoma continues to progress and excel along with it.

We should develop new and higher standards and open them up to honest review and assessment by parents, teachers and even outside experts with proven results. We shouldn't be afraid of this scrutiny. This starts with protecting our children's education and having strong, challenging academic standards that exceed the recently repealed Oklahoma Academic Standards.



# You are not alone

Many business associations, economic development organizations and other institutions throughout Oklahoma and across the nation have gone on record supporting college and career ready standards. Now is not the time to sit on the sidelines. Please utilize this toolkit to get engaged as we all work to better align our state's education system with our future workforce needs. Oklahoma's economic prosperity depends on it.

## Resources

### Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative

[www.okeducatedworkforce.org](http://www.okeducatedworkforce.org)

The Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative seeks to aggressively engage the business community on education issues to ensure our common education system is aligned with the needs of our workforce both today and into the future. The OEWI board is made up of business leaders who know firsthand the importance of a talent pipeline and see education as a pressing economic development issue.

### State Chamber of Oklahoma

[www.okstatechamber.com](http://www.okstatechamber.com)

Representing more than 1,000 Oklahoma businesses and 350,000 employees, the State Chamber of Oklahoma has been the state's leading advocate for business since 1926.

### U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Education and Workforce

<http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/center-education-and-workforce>

The Center for Education and Workforce, through its research, programs, and policy on education and skills training, mobilizes the business community to be more engaged partners, challenge the status quo, and connect education and workforce reforms to economic development.

### Change the Equation

[www.changetheequation.org](http://www.changetheequation.org)

Check out their *Business Leader's Guide: Mobilizing State Action on STEM* and other helpful resources.

### Business Center for a College- and Career-Ready America

[www.businessandeducation.org](http://www.businessandeducation.org)

Find downloadable tools, templates and materials — created for and by business leaders — to bolster your efforts to support the college- and career-ready agenda.

### **Ready Kentucky: Building Employer Support for Student Success**

This business toolkit includes several items designed to help Kentucky business leaders get more engaged in education issues

[www.kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EmployerKitWeb\\_0.pdf](http://www.kychamber.com/sites/default/files/EmployerKitWeb_0.pdf)

### **The Public Policy Institute of New York State**

Another business toolkit meant to aid business leaders better communicate with their employees, peers, vendors and customers about the importance of getting involved in education

[www.ppiny.org](http://www.ppiny.org)





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