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## Testimony Prepared for Public Hearings on Development of a Statewide School-to-Work System

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Testimony Prepared for Public Hearings on  
Development of a Statewide School-to-Work System

Prepared by

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February 19, 1996

Good afternoon. My name is Kevin Hollenbeck and I am a Senior Economist with the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo. I am also Vice President of the Portage Board of Education, serve on the Kalamazoo County Education for Employment (EFE) Council, and on the Advisory Board for the Western Michigan University Center for the Study of At-Risk Students.

I have studied the economic aspects of education and training programs for the last 20 years, and have specialized in school-to-work programs over the past 3 years. I have authored the studies, "In Their Own Words: Student Perspectives on School-to-Work Opportunities" to be published this year by the Academy of Educational Development, a chapter in a book titled, "Support Mechanisms Needed in School-to-Work Transition Programs," and "An Evaluation of the Manufacturing Technology Partnership (MTP) Program." The latter is a study funded by the Mott Foundation and is the only rigorous evaluation of the outcomes of a school-to-work program to date. MTP is a partnership that is operating in Genesee County. In my evaluation of it, I followed students in MTP and a comparison group of students not in MTP for a three-year period. I will be delivering this report to MTP administrators and the Mott Foundation on February 29th, after which the results will become public. I am also currently under contract with the State of Ohio's School-to-Work Office to help them develop an evaluation of their school-to-work initiatives.

I appreciate your efforts to learn about school-to-work programs from the public and I thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. I would like to share with you some of my observations about school-to-work programs derived from my studies, and I would like to point out some lessons that I think you, as legislators, should learn as you determine the appropriate legislative role in helping to develop Michigan's system.

First, you should be aware that Michigan is fortunate enough to have two of the best school-to-work programs in the country. The EFE consortium in Kalamazoo County and the MTP Program in Genesee County have been recognized nationally as exemplary programs. I know that other excellent programs are evolving in the State -- in Saginaw and in Grand Rapids, for example -- but these two programs are nationally, and even internationally,

renowned. What is interesting is that these two programs developed locally, using local resources and relying on collaborations of local education, business, and union partners. Thus lesson #1 is that it is not necessary to have State involvement to develop an excellent program. The implication is that you and the School-to-Work (STW) office in the Michigan Jobs Commission (MJC) should act as catalysts or resources, not as initiators. If we are going to have high quality programs, they are going to be developed through collaborations at the local level by business, education, and workers who understand the strengths and weaknesses of the local economy and educational systems. Top-down directives and regulations will probably be counterproductive.

The theory underlying school-to-work programming is that many students learn best when subject matter is presented in a context for which they can see practical application. For example, instead of memorizing trigonometric relationships -- sines, cosines, and tangents -- students will internalize these concepts if they have to set up machinery that involves angular measurement. Furthermore, proponents of school-to-work programming suggest that students will acquire skills and knowledge that are more relevant to them in their eventual careers than what they will learn in traditional school curricula and settings. It is fair to say that this theory is being borne out in selected programs, such as in Kalamazoo and in Flint. The problem that educators and administrators are facing in Michigan and across the Nation is how to move STW programs *up to scale*.

I argue that there are two main barriers to overcome. The first barrier is generating employer involvement. By and large, from the employer perspective, involvement in STW is all cost and little benefit. Having been a mentor, let me tell you that it takes time and energy to train and plan for a student's worksite experience. To be sure, some employers acknowledge their concern about future shortages of skilled workers and see STW programs as a way to reduce future recruitment and training costs. But most employers have very little financial slack to be investing in future workers; they're too busy trying to compete today. Furthermore, a consistent finding in most evaluations of exemplary STW programs is that employers are telling educators what to teach, but they are not listening to educators and they are not trying to tailor their activities for youth mentees to co-ordinate with what is being taught in school. Lesson #2 is that a lack of employer involvement is likely to constrain the number of students that can be served and lesson #2A is that quality STW programs require employers who are willing to be *true* partners with educators, not just *senior* partners.

Some people are arguing that money is the answer to increasing employer participation through either grants or tax preferences. I do not subscribe to this argument. I believe that the answer is to work with businesses to develop a culture where companies accept the responsibility of working with educators to develop youth. It will become unthinkable for a business not to participate. This is how the German dual apprenticeship system works, and closer to home, this is how Kalamazoo County has achieved a higher level of employer involvement than any other program in the country.

The second barrier to moving up to scale has to do with postsecondary education. Many parents perceive that school-to-work programs de-emphasize college attendance and therefore they discourage their children from participating in them. (Some programs are changing their names to School-to-Career to try to overcome this perception.) I have come to believe that this perception is wrong, and in fact, school-to-work programs encourage many students to attend postsecondary education who otherwise would not have. I have interviewed students who would not be college-bound, except for the fact they are now in apprenticeship programs that require much formal, technical training in community colleges. Recently in Portage, our high school valedictorian was in a health occupations program at Bronson Hospital. Nevertheless, lesson #3 is that parents tend to want their children to attend four-year colleges and universities and the parents perceive that STW programs will not result in that outcome. With this issue, the STW Office or the legislature could play a positive role by collecting data on student outcomes from school-to-work programs and by undertaking a marketing campaign to parents based on the facts.

Another problem related to postsecondary education that STW programs have encountered has been the inertia that four-year colleges and universities have displayed in failing to recognize in their application and entrance procedures the rigorous content of many STW programs. The attitude that these institutions are displaying is the traditional one that school-to-work programs are vocational education and are not counted toward required course work for admission. Perhaps the most important thing that you, as legislators, could accomplish would be to use your leverage over higher education to get them to adopt a more enlightened treatment of school-to-work programs in their admissions processes. Beyond that, these institutions need a more enlightened attitude toward course articulation with STW programs.

If you and the State of Michigan make a commitment to move STW programming up to scale, then I would urge you to maintain a strong involvement of education (the Michigan Department of Education as well as local school districts) in the process. The target population of school-to-work programs is *students*. To achieve high quality programs for all students, attention and resources must be invested in professional development of teachers and worksite staff; in curriculum development that integrates academic, employability, and vocational skills; in K-12 systemic programming; in skill certification; and in student counseling. These activities have traditionally been in the domain of education, not in adult training and job development.

My last comment is a plea for more research and data collection. I guess that I would not be worth my salt as a researcher if I didn't make this suggestion. But I am dismayed by the lack of research and evaluation that the State of Michigan undertakes and at the disdain that is held toward research and evaluation. In recent interactions with both the Michigan Jobs Commission and the Michigan Department of Education, I have been told that they are not interested in research, because they "know" the answer and prefer to invest their resources in marketing their programs. It seems to me to be a disaster in the making to market a program

without a solid research base supporting it and without a total quality approach that constantly measures how well the program is working and how it should be revised. I wonder how many business firms invest as little in research and development (both before and after marketing) as the State of Michigan does in education and training. Certainly, my contacts and experience suggest that other states are doing much better.

Thank you.