

The Seamless Web: Minnesota's New Education System

10 School-to-Work

In December, 1988, the *National School Board Journal* did a "voice poll" (phone in to recorded questions) on the issue of School-to-Work. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents said they opposed School-to-work. Most of these 87 percent were vehement in their opposition. What is School-to-Work, and why is it stirring up intense opposition among the American public?

School-to-Work (STW) refers to the School To Work Opportunities Act passed by Congress in 1994, the same year that Goals 2000 was passed. School-to-Work is administered by the Department of Labor, while Goals 2000 is run by the Department of Education. Like Goals 2000, STW set up a system of federal grants which states can receive if they agree to implement the federal regulations. Minnesota has agreed to the numerous and revolutionary conditions of the federal STW act.

Minnesota's STW system is largely implemented through the Profile of Learning. The Profile, for example, requires students to begin the career selection process in kindergarten. It requires students to pick a career by the eighth grade, and the career selection process ends in the 10th grade. How many students are ready to choose their career at age 13? This does not mean that students are unable to change their career choice. It does mean, however, that the student's academic program will be chosen largely based on the student's career choice. It also means that education central planners will have a huge influence on directing students into those occupations that are deemed desirable for the "greater good" of society.

To understand Minnesota's new system of education, we must understand STW. Minnesota's grant application for STW funds says that the Graduation Standards are the "cornerstone" of the state's fulfillment of the School-To-Work guidelines.⁵⁶ In other words, the Graduation Standards are not only designed to make Minnesota conform with Goals 2000, they also fulfill STW.

Like the other parts of the revolution in education, STW is promoted under false pretenses. The public would not accept it if it knew what it was. The strategy of the advocates, as summarized by *World* magazine, is, "The lesson of its death [the Clinton attempt to socialize medicine] taught the administration how to move forward on a progressive agenda: Go slow, go quiet, and use creative public relations."⁵⁷

The main architects of the STW program are Robert Reich, Ira Magaziner and Marc Tucker—described by *Investors Business Daily* as "longtime advocates of central economic planning."⁵⁸

What is School-to-Work? First, we must recognize what it's not. STW is not the inclusion of vocational programs, apprenticeship programs, or career counseling in our schools. We already do all that. We can do more along those lines if necessary. K-12 education in the United States has historically been a two-track system. One track has been college preparatory; the other track has been vocational. How does that change under STW?

Texas policy analyst Chris Patterson described STW in Texas where the program is more developed than in Minnesota. Patterson said:

At this time there are many school districts in Texas and whole regions of the state (such as the Rio Grande Valley) that have fully implemented STW. These schools, school districts and regions have eliminated the traditional, college preparatory liberal arts education and replaced it with academically-enriched vocational programs for all schools.⁵⁹

This is exactly what STW intends to do. The National School-to-Work Learning & Information Center said, "We can no longer afford a two-tiered education system."⁶⁰ STW makes all education vocational. Samuel Blumenfeld described STW this way: "Now the government will plan your life for you. You are steered into a specific vocational area and trained for that—a servant of the state, of big government and the economy. You will not become a highly literate, independent individual."⁶¹

The main feature of STW is that it changes the purpose and orientation of education. Historically, K-12 education in the United States has existed to transmit important knowledge to our children. This knowledge includes a basic understanding of reading, writing, language, mathematics, history, the arts, science and the like.

Knowledge has always been seen as being its own reward, as being good in itself, as being an end in itself. Our nation has wanted to give its children a good education primarily because that goal is consistent with what we want our children to be. At the same time, however, our nation has understood that knowledge has many applications—including employment—but knowledge also equips people to be good citizens, to provide for families, and to foster self-fulfillment as well as preparing them for employment.

Under STW, however, knowledge is no longer the primary purpose of education. Vocational training becomes the primary objective and everything else becomes secondary. For that reason, STW organizes all education around career majors. Education is seen as having value only if it contributes to performance on some job. Knowledge is no longer seen as being an end in itself but becomes merely a means to an end.

This dramatic change in the purpose of education is well illustrated by a STW flier that is being used to explain the program. This flier, in big bold letters, says:

180,000 Truck Drivers have Baccalaureate Degrees.

270,000 Sales People have Baccalaureate Degrees.

Many Americans would see truck drivers and sales people having college degrees as being a good thing. STW, in contrast, sees this fact in a negative light. The view of the flyer quoted above is that if you are a truck driver or a salesperson, it is wrong for you to have a college degree. Society has wasted its educational resources on you. Knowledge is viewed as having merit only if it is necessary for a vocation. Knowledge no longer has value in itself.

Minnesota's *School-to-Work Resource Guide* says the purpose of STW is to "restructure education around career majors."⁶² That is, under STW, the focal point of all education is vocational, including education which has historically been considered liberal arts. Lynne Cheney said it as follows: "The liberal arts, shoved aside or distorted by the School-to-Work system, were so named because they foster the habits of mind necessary for freedom."⁶³

This STW philosophy is part of a utilitarian world-view. (Things have value only in terms of their usefulness.) Lenin put it this way, "Every bit of knowledge one acquires should be accompanied by a demonstration of how it can be applied to the practical needs of society."⁶⁴ Liberal arts education goes by the wayside under STW.

WHAT IS A "SEAMLESS SYSTEM"?

Minnesota's STW grant application (also essentially a contract with the federal government for the STW funds) begins by defining the purpose of STW as follows: "Minnesota's vision is to create a seamless system of education and workforce preparation for all learners, tied to the needs of a competitive economic workplace."⁶⁵

Notice the word "seamless." That word choice comes from the previously quoted letter from Marc Tucker to Hillary Clinton back in 1992, just after Bill Clinton had been elected President of the United States. What does "seamless" mean when combined with the word "system"? Imagine yourself in an article of clothing, like coveralls or a jumpsuit, with no seams—no seams for buttons, no seams for zippers, no seams for shoulders, no seams at all. This is a suit that you cannot get out of.

To that end, Minnesota's STW contract with the federal government says: "We seek the full 100 percent participation of employers statewide."⁶⁶ The contract also says: "[STW will ensure] that local/regional partnerships impact *all* learners." (Their emphasis.)⁶⁷ Notice the emphasis on the word "all." STW intends to encompass all businesses, all schools, all learners, of all ages from cradle-to-grave. That is the seamless system.

Notice also the word "system." The word "system" is so important to STW that Minnesota's STW contract used the word 10 times in the first page alone! Most of the time the word is capitalized to emphasize its importance.⁶⁸

What is a system? *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines "system" as: "a set or arrangement of things so related or connected as to form a unity or organic whole." That is exactly what STW does. It restructures all of education, as well as much of the business world, government and society, to form an organic whole built around the STW agenda.

STW is genuinely revolutionary. The statement quoted above from Minnesota's contract correctly explains that the new system creates a "seamless system of education...tied to the needs of a competitive economic marketplace." In other words, the perceived needs of the marketplace will now, by design, dictate education policy. Education exists to meet the needs of big business.

ARE CHILDREN "HUMAN RESOURCES"?

STW repeatedly uses the words "human resources" to describe our students. All people are seen that way by the new system. This means that students in a classroom are viewed in essentially the same way that businesses evaluate any other commodity, such as crude oil, for example. When we have too much oil, and the price of crude drops below \$10 a barrel, then the marketplace adjusts to increase demand and decrease production.

Why be concerned about viewing people as "human resources"? Consider the following example: Each year Farmer Brown takes inventory of his resources. He has farmland, a set of buildings, financial assets, corn and soybeans in the bin and a line of machinery. One of his assets, a John Deere combine, has served him well but is now 16 years old. Needed repairs will soon make this combine more expensive to own than a newer model.

Farmer Brown makes a wise business decision and begins to shop for a newer combine. Farmer Brown also has some people who help make his farm operation work. He is married and has several children. What if Farmer Brown were to view his family the same way he views his machinery—as "resources"? Farmer Brown's wife is a good deal older than his combine. Why not trade her in for a newer model who can work harder and who has less risk of having medical expenses? (She, of course, could look at him the same way.)

Viewing people as "human resources" and as "human capital" provides an inherently dehumanizing perspective on human life. Issues like freedom, morality, marriage, family and inherent worth disappear from the equation. This, however, is exactly what STW does, and it leaves us with a view of education and life where human beings have value only insofar as they contribute to some financial objective.

WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS UNDER STW?

STW governance in Minnesota closely follows the requirements of the federal law. In Minnesota's system, a Governor's Workforce Development Council of 32 members was established to run the program, all appointed by the Governor. Minnesota's STW contract states: "The Governor's Workforce Development Council (GWDC) will have oversight responsibility for Minnesota's STW Initiative and will develop policy that supports this effort."⁶⁹ In other words, the Legislature has been bypassed in setting policy and in exercising oversight. Non-elected functionaries will run STW, which, in turn, largely runs the schools.

The state was then divided into six regions, each with a regional governance board, and each region having a number of local STW units within it. Minnesota's STW grant application says "Local/regional STW partnerships must establish governing boards composed of a majority membership of employers."⁷⁰ None of the members of these regional and local STW boards is elected by the voters. They are all appointed, and business interests are required to have the majority vote. This system is totally consistent with the goals of STW—all education is vocational and is run from the top down.

We should take note of the fact that most elected officials, such as school boards and legislators, are bypassed in the governance scheme. The STW contract specifically gives the new appointed boards the authority to set education policy. In addition, the new Workforce Investment Act passed in 1998 gives similar appointed boards the authority to allocate our tax dollars as they see fit. The people left out, once again, are parents, local voters, teachers and legislators—the individuals who, in a free system of government, must be the ones to make the policy decisions and to allocate government resources.

DOES STW IMPROVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

Business is not the bad guy under STW. Businesses have been swept into the system just like everyone else by being told that they will receive a better-equipped employee when STW is implemented, just like Minnesota citizens have been told that Goals 2000, the Profile of Learning, and STW will improve education in Minnesota.

Is there reason to believe that STW will actually improve education? No, there is not. In Texas, which has been the national showcase for the development of STW, student performance has failed to improve, and, in many ways, has declined. For example, Texas has an astounding 43 percent drop out rate, a 33 percent increase in the past ten years. Texas now has the second lowest high school completion rate in the nation.⁷¹

In both Goals 2000 and STW, there is an absence of any real analysis of what the problems are in education and how those problems can be solved. (See chapter 18.) Compare that unwillingness to look at what actually works to the following excerpt from testimony submitted to the Minnesota House Education Committee on January 26, 1999:

In a study just published by *U. S. News and World Report* working with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, the following guidelines were identified for a good education system: (1) high academic standards, (2) a core curriculum, (3) highly qualified teachers, (4) strong mentoring for new teachers, (5) partnerships between parents and schools, (6) administrators and teachers who know each child, and (7) high attendance rates....The Profile of Learning does not address the [principles outlined above].

The conclusions from the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) (in which the U. S. had average scores) were (1) more time should be spent teaching basic rather than general topics, (2) standardized teaching manuals should be tested in the classroom before being published, (3)

"whole class interactive teaching" is more effective than working in small groups, and (4) systems where efforts are made to ensure that students do not fall behind achieve higher results. The Profile methods support smaller groups and general topics which goes against the TIMMS recommendations.⁷²

These recommendations make no claim to being a comprehensive plan for improving education. At the same time, however, the recommendations are based on genuine research which attempts to evaluate what works and what does not. *The new system of education conspicuously avoids that kind of research.* Instead, the argument for STW is typically stated as follows:

Reinventing K-12 Education

The SCANS report provided the foundation for the School-To-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, in turn the foundation for the school-to-work, or "school-to-careers," or "cradle-to-career" movement to link learning and earning. The goals of the movement are to provide better education, better employment prospects, adult role models, and multiple post-secondary options for all students.⁷³

This may or may not sound attractive, but notice that it speaks only in pious platitudes and makes no attempt to include actual research, nor does it engage in a genuine evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in education, nor does it evaluate how identified weaknesses can be remedied. This rhetoric-centered approach is the standard fare from education's central planners. Why is that? The new system is not designed to improve education; it is designed to "reinvent education" to what the central planners want it to be. In doing so, as Samuel Blumenfeld said, the new system "violates every principle of a free society."⁷⁴

Notes:

56. Minnesota School-to-Work Initiative, p. 6.
57. World, September 5, 1998. p. 15.
58. Investors Business Daily, August 27, 1998, p. 1.
59. June, 1996 update, 400 Virginia Ave., Suite 210, Washington, D. C.
60. The National School-to-Work Learning & Information Center, "Dispelling Myths about School-to-Work," June, 1996.
61. Investor's Business Daily, August 27, 1998. p. 2.
62. Making Connections: School-To-Work Resource Guide, p. 30.
63. Lynne Cheney, former chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Star Tribune, February 3, 1998.
64. Quoted by Robert Beck in "Polytechnical Education: A STEP," National Center for Research in Vocational Education, U. of Calif. Berkeley, September, 1990, p. 3.
65. Minnesota School-To-Work Initiative, Section I, no page number given.
66. Ibid., p. 25.
67. Ibid., p. 1.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., p. 10.
70. Ibid., p. 29
71. Chris Patterson, "School-to-Work in Texas: Showcase for National Education Reform," Presented to the East Coast STW Conference by The Family Foundation, Heritage Foundation, and the Virginia Education Coalition, August 28, 1998.
72. Harley Feldman, Co-chair of the Teaching and Learning Advisory Committee of the Minnetonka School District.
73. Making Connections: School-To-Work Resource Guide, p. 11.
74. As quoted in Investor's Business Daily, August 27, 1998, p. 2.