

The Seamless Web: Minnesota's New Education System

14 The Workforce Investment Act

Previously called the "careers bill," the Workforce Investment Act was passed by the Republican-controlled Congress in July 1998, by a non-recorded voice vote. This bill solidifies and extends the federal government's control over job training programs for the adult population. What School-to-Work did for K-12 students, the careers bill does for adult education.

An earlier form of the bill in 1996 included a repeal of the federal STW Act. That bill died when President Clinton threatened a veto.¹¹⁹ The 1998 bill which passed, however, not only failed to abolish STW, it contained new STW funding. The 1998 Republican Congress generally decided to go along with the liberal agenda rather than stand up for the Republican platform of free enterprise and limited government. That is why Republicans lost seats in the 1998 elections when they were expected to make major gains. Senators Paul Wellstone and Ted Kennedy celebrated the passage of this bill.

Not only did the Republican Congress pass this bill even though it was contrary to the Republican platform, it also abused the legislative process in doing so. Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri had amended the bill to remove all School-to-Work funding. Many members of Congress voted for the bill for that reason. The House-Senate conference committee, however, nullified the Ashcroft amendment. The House-Senate leadership then brought the final bill up for passage in each body when only a handful of members, who conveniently were staunch supporters of the bill, were present. It passed on a non-recorded voice vote with no one there to object. Using that procedure, the Republican leaders passed a bill they wanted without any of their members having to explain a bad vote to their constituents.

In describing this bill, Ceridian Corporation CEO, Lawrence Perlman, said "The act consolidates some 100 separate job training programs into a comprehensive work force development system."¹²⁰ The meaning of "comprehensive" "system" is, of course, the same as the "seamless system" that was created by the STW Act. The Workforce Investment Act extends the seamless system into a "cradle to grave" program of "lifelong learning." The U. S. Secretary of Labor described the bill as a "one-stop system" of job training for adult workers.¹²¹ Unlike Goals 2000 and STW, there is no grant application process for the new system; all states are now in this national system by force of federal law.

Like STW, the Workforce Investment Act creates a statewide board to set policy and to allocate funds for the job training system. Once again, all board members will be appointed, most of them by the governor. These boards, once again, will bypass the legislators in making policy decisions and in allocating funds.

The law requires that businesses pay at least 50 percent of the cost of the job training programs. That means, of course, that up to 50 percent of the job training will be paid by taxpayers, even though the taxpayers, as voters, will have little to say about how the new system works and what it does.

It is easy to see why big businesses can be convinced to support this new law. The taxpayers will pay up to 50 percent of the cost of training their employees. The businesses will have a major say about what kind of jobs the workers are trained for. Why not take advantage of it? Most employees, however, still work for small companies. How many small businesses will be represented on the boards of control? Not very many. Can this huge new system force most every business to participate whether it wishes to or not? It probably can.

Is it desirable to consolidate all the adult state-federal job training programs into one system? Let us look at the big education merger in Minnesota as an example. In 1991, Minnesota merged its state technical colleges, community colleges and state universities into one large system governed by one board. The argument was that we needed to consolidate and streamline the whole program. Minnesota's STW contract, however, said that this merger made it easy to require all the schools in the entire system to revise its admissions requirements all at the same time, and all in the same way, to focus on the Profile of Learning. The contract said: "MnScu [the new super-board that governs the system] is currently aligning its admissions standards and criteria with high school graduation standards. This is a major shift away from using traditional grades to basing admissions on the skills and competencies learners have developed."¹²² As we can see, it is all too easy for central planners to control a single unified labor system.

How can people at the top control this entire system? Follow the money trail. The appointed boards have supervisory authority over, and allocate, all the billions of federal training dollars. These boards ultimately answer to the federal Department of Labor which is controlled by the President. These boards answer neither to legislators nor to Congress. By controlling the money in a unified system, the executive branch of the federal government has ultimate power to control the system.

What kind of pressure can be put on workers to become part of this system? The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) said: "Our goal is to explore innovative approaches for making sure that *all* children reach the standard we have in mind for the Certificate of Initial Mastery, whether or not they are in school."¹²³ How will people receive CIMs if they are not in school? Very simple, require the training programs in the Workforce Investment Act to issue CIMs to its graduates, and require participating business to require CIMs for job applicants. Workers will then have little choice about joining the system. The new boards have control over the job-training schools because they accredit the schools, and the schools and businesses, in turn, are developing a computerized data file on every worker that ever enters the system.

Why is the United States of America the strongest economy in the world today? Is it because we have had centralized training for our workers? Or is it because we have been free? Is it because of extensive intertwining of government and business, or is it because enterprise in America has been free? Do we really want the German or Japanese systems where business and government are married to each other, or do we want business and government to be separate so that enterprise can be free?

The SCANS Report, which the Workforce Investment Act follows closely, makes it apparent that it has little confidence in the educational and economic systems of the United States while it applauds the education and economic systems of Germany and Japan. Isn't it interesting, seven years after the SCANS Report was printed, that the economy of the United States is strong while the economies of Germany and Japan are plagued with high unemployment, numerous bankruptcies and zero growth. Do we really want highly regulated economies like Germany and Japan, or do we want business and government to be separate so that enterprise can be free?

Is this really what business wants? Lawrence Perlman described the needs of businesses this way: "Sixty percent [of manufacturers] said current workers lack basic math skills and more than fifty percent reported serious deficiencies in basic writing and reading comprehension."¹²⁴ So what will the "seamless web" do about these deficiencies?

The revolution in education avoids strategies such as core knowledge that have been proven to work well in teaching basic skills. The new system makes no analysis of what works in

education and what does not. It instead encourages schools to have students rely on calculators instead of learning basic math skills. It requires children to "discover" math and science principles instead of learning them from textbooks. It embraces "creative spelling" instead of teaching children how to spell correctly, and it is comfortable with the inferior "whole language" method of teaching reading instead of emphasizing phonics which has proven to work much better.¹²⁵ The new system of education, including the Workforce Investment Act, consistently avoids promoting what works. At the same time it dumbs down the curriculum. It will give business an inferior product, not a better one.

Marc Tucker called for a "seamless web" of nationalized life-long education from "cradle to grave." The Workforce Investment Act is the adult education portion of that single seamless web. It is all about central planning. It is all about control.

Notes:

- 119. The United States Conference of Mayors, "Washington Outlook."
- 120. Star Tribune, August 24, 1998, p. D3.
- 121. Sec'y of Labor Alexis Herman, "Implementing the Workforce Investment Act of 1998," August 8, 1998, p. 2.
- 122. Minnesota School-to-Work Initiative, p. 7.
- 123. National Center on Education and the Economy, "Workforce Skills Program." No page or date given.
- 124. Star Tribune, August 24, 1998, p. D3.
- 125. Dr. Patrick Groff, National Education Policy Conference 10, February 30, 1999.