Study Finds Curriculums and Training Programs Are Not Keeping Pace with Current Workforce Attitudes and Needs

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March 31, 2008 - An overwhelming majority of surveyed school superintendents who educate future workers and employers who hire them agree that creativity is increasingly important in U.S. workplaces, according to key findings issued today from a forthcoming report by The Conference Board and Americans for the Arts, in partnership with the American Association of School Administrators. Download an executive summary of the report.

Ready to Innovate: Are Educators and Executives Aligned on the Creative Readiness of the U.S. Workforce? states that 99% of the 155 surveyed school superintendents and 97% of the 89 surveyed employers believe that arts training—and, to a lesser degree, communications studies—are crucial to developing creativity. Yet, there is a fundamental gap between understanding this truth and putting it into meaningful practice. Findings indicate that most high schools and employers provide such training and studies only on an elective or “as needed” basis.

“This study offers a great deal of food for thought and continued investigation,” says Jonathan Spector, Chief Executive Officer of The Conference Board. “In particular, we believe it is time for employers to evaluate how well their corporate support of education and the arts, as well as their own employee-training programs, stack up against the strategic value they themselves place on innovation and its creative underpinning. It is also time for greater dialogue within and across all sectors to better understand and align efforts to foster creativity in current and future employees.”

Spector will be discussing the findings tonight at the 21st Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture, featuring author Daniel Pink, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., and tomorrow morning in testimony to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment & Related Agencies on the Role of the Arts in Creativity and Innovation. These events are part of Arts Advocacy Day, a national convening presented by Americans for the Arts.

Reads the report: “While creativity is recognized as a critical ingredient to success in the workplace, schools and businesses need to re-examine their curriculums and training programs to determine the most effective way to increase the emphasis on developing this skill. That’s the only true way to effect change and turn out better qualified workers with more creative talents.”

DEFINING CREATIVITY THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Both the superintendents and employers surveyed agree that the ability to identify new patterns of
behavior or new combinations of actions and integration of knowledge across different disciplines are foremost in demonstrating creativity. Other responses received reveal a lack of alignment. For example, employers say problem identification and articulation are the most important talents indicating creativity. School superintendents rank this skill only 9th. While these superintendents rate problem-solving the highest, employers rank it 8th.

These discrepancies bolster the view that while schools teach students how to solve problems put before them, the business sector wants workers who can identify the problems in the first place.

In addition, 70% of superintendents presume employers seek out “creative thinkers” over “technically skilled” individuals. Employers, as a group, are evenly split (49/51 respectively).

“The findings of the Ready to Innovate report present an opportunity for school system and business leaders to further engage in a dialogue about how best to foster creativity among students, not only to produce a competitive workforce, but also to help all students succeed in life,” says Paul D. Houston, AASA executive director.

HOW TO IDENTIFY CREATIVE WORKERS

Frustratingly, 85% of employers concerned with hiring creative people say they can’t find the applicants they seek. These employers use job interviews as their primary tool for assessing creativity and they mostly look for spontaneity and creative responses to hypothetical scenarios.

“There is no question that the arts should be an essential element of education,” said Robert L. Lynch, President and CEO of Americans for the Arts. “Additionally, the arts are an indispensable tool for building the creative thinking skills essential to ensuring that American business and culture will prosper. And this study demonstrates there is increased recognition among business and education leaders that the arts are a vital factor to building a competitive and highly effective workforce.”

Eighty-three percent of educators and 61% of employers responded that they feel responsible for fostering creativity. However, only three from a list of 12 creativity-promoting educational activities/experiences are part of the curriculum in half of the surveyed schools. And of a comparable list of eight employee activities/training options, less than one in ten employers surveyed said they provide seven of them to all their employees. In addition, only four of the eight options are offered even on an “as needed” basis by more than half the employers.

The situation isn’t much better among those employers who cite creativity as a primary hiring criterion. In this group, 80% provide the three activities/training options that they say best develop creativity—working in departments other than their own, managerial coaching, and mentoring—only on an “as needed” basis.

In summary, this new research shows that both businesses and schools recognize the critical role of creativity as a workforce skill, and both groups accept the role they have in fostering it. Both also recognize that arts-training is a key way to foster creativity. Yet despite this recognition, most schools do not include arts training as a mandatory part of the curriculum, and most businesses provide creativity-fostering training only to very few employees. With this growing recognition of the role a creative workforce has on the global competitiveness of American business, both business and education leaders need to examine what changes can be made to more widely foster these skills in our current—and especially our future—workers.

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About The Conference Board

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About Americans for the Arts
Americans for the Arts is the leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With offices in Washington, DC, and New York City, it has a record of 48 years of service. Americans for the Arts is dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts. Additional information is available at www.AmericansForTheArts.org.

About the American Association of School Administrators
The American Association of School Administrators (www.aasa.org), founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States. AASA’s mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children. AASA’s major focus is standing up for public education.