Background

The success of any individual school or school district clearly correlates with the level of engagement by local community stakeholders, including private and public sector organizations. Maintaining a continuous and intellectually honest dialogue with these partners is critical to ensuring that best practices are identified and followed, that local leaders and activists are provided a forum through which to share feedback, and that outside-the-box problem solving becomes the norm for addressing the growing challenges facing our schools and school children.

On April 29, the Indiana Civil Rights Commission attempted to facilitate this kind of dialogue, bringing together schools and community partners in a collaborative education roundtable discussion at the Genesis Center in Gary As part of the *Navigating the Changing Landscape in Housing, Education, and Employment* conference.

The meeting began with a panel discussion moderated by ICRC Education Director Danny Lopez that brought together experts on regional education and training issues. Ivy Tech-Gary Chancellor Jose Valtierra, northwest Indiana WorkOne Vice-President Robyn Minton, and East Chicago School Board Member Frank Rivera all shared their unique perspectives and fielded questions from the audience concerning some of the region's most pressing education-related topics. Participants from local schools, non-profit organizations, and private businesses were then given the opportunity to work as teams to discuss local challenges and identify existing local programs, services, and organizations currently working to address them.

In the end, this community conversation provided the framework for this report, a series of consensus obstacles to long-term educational and training success in Lake County and a short list of existing best practices that can be tailored to fit all communities. The report is broken down by those topics that were consistently highlighted by all groups. That is not to suggest, of course, that these are the only challenges we as a state or a region face. However, the goal is to begin tackling these major issues one by one in a comprehensive, collaborative, and innovative way.

Changing Demographics Across the State

Within the last few decades, the demographic makeup of Indiana has changed dramatically. As a result, Indiana's schools have grown exceedingly culturally diverse, a new challenge for the state's educators. This can often lead to gaps in understanding between teachers and administrators and families as the former adapt to these differences in home environments, cultures, and customs. During the discussion, these issues of basic cultural differences between students, teachers, and administration were common. Parents and community leaders expressed their frustration with the inflexibility of school administrators and teachers who they perceived were often unwilling to connect with students and their families on a grassroots level. Irritation with faculties that do not mirror the diversity in the student body was also a common theme throughout the discussion. Of course, these challenges can be seen throughout the state as communities grow more demographically diverse.

Existing Programming

- *Choosing a method of cultural awareness training:*
    - Cultural competency**:** With this method, teachers participate in a series of training seminars or classes to understand the diverse cultures of the surrounding area. This is used to construct a culturally sensitive plan for the student body.
    - Cultural responsiveness: This method requires more introspection on the part of the teacher to better understand their own cultural backgrounds and how that influences their teaching methods. After this introspection, educators communicate and interact with their students to form a teaching plan that utilizes the skills from the students and is conducive to their cultural norms.
    - Ideally, a hybrid of the two methods can be used in schools to expand the cultural knowledge of its staff while being aware of the talents of the individual students. However, it is up to the individual institutions to decide which method is best for their situation.

- *Cultural Awareness in Indiana:*
    - The Indiana University Southeast School of Education has, through the New Neighbors program, integrated cultural awareness and understanding into the curriculum of many of their education courses. As a result, the education faculty has been given new tools with which to build cultural awareness into individual course syllabi to ensure that students graduate with a thorough appreciation for these important issues.

    - The University of South Florida currently has a plan in place to increase the cultural awareness of its students and faculty through cultural competency education and uses classes to increase the cultural awareness of its faculty[1]. This is a plan that can be implemented in schools across the state to help increase the cultural awareness of educators and students alike.

[1]FMHI Diversity Plan: http://intra.cbcs.usf.edu/Diversity/DiversityResources.cfm

- o Federally funded Equity Assistance Centers like the **Equity Alliance** in the southwest[2] and the **Programs for Educational Opportunities (PEO) for Indiana**[3] also offer free education materials to those wishing to hold cultural competency classes.

- *Encouraging interest in education to increase future diversity:*
  - o In North Carolina, students in the Wake County School Corporation are given a full day to shadow a member of the community whose job they find interesting[4]. A model similar to this can be used to get students interested in teaching. Instead of simply closing school for a day, which is both costly and difficult to manage, students can be asked to shadow a teacher during school hours for a set amount of time.

Job Skills and Resources

Schools across Indiana are improving their test scores in reading, math, and science. While these skills are vital to competing in the globalized economy, soft skills such as effective communication and personal financial management are also important. Education regarding these skills needs to be integrated within the current system to ensure Indiana students have the best possible chance of succeeding in their future careers. One such soft skill that was noted by several participants was financial literacy, the ability of students to understand financial skills and strategies and apply them to their own individual circumstances in a responsible way.

Existing Programming

- *Job Training:*
  - o Indiana Department of Workforce Development currently operates **WorkOne Centers** in offices throughout the state, offering workshops and training to help Indiana residents find jobs and develop skill sets. These workshops include résumé help, interviewing techniques, and advising in career planning.
  - o The **Urban League of Indianapolis** also offers job training as well as workshops on financial literacy.

- *Financial Literacy:*
  - o The worldwide nonprofit organization **Junior Achievement** has a multitude of helpful resources regarding workforce preparedness as well as financial literacy. This organization currently has branches in Indianapolis (Junior Achievement of Central

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[2] Free, Online Cultural Competency resources: http://ea.niusileadscape.org/lc

[3] Cultural Competency Resources for Indiana: http://peo.soe.umich.edu/

[4] http://www.wcpss.net/school_to_career/work_based_learning/job_shadow/index.html

Indiana), Evansville, Elkhart, Fort Wayne, Lafayette, Richmond, South Bend/Mishawaka, and Terre Haute. JACI and other branches offer hands-on learning experiences to students in elementary through high school. In these volunteer-run events, students are taught how to manage their personal finances and learn how the business world operates.

- o The **Indiana Bankers Association** offers consumer tips in the Communications section of their website for parents interested in financial responsibility.
- o **PBS.org** offers several online games for children aimed at helping them learn the basics of financial responsibility at a young age[5].
- o For older students and adults, the American Institute of Public Accountants has created an entire website dedicated to promoting financial literacy at all stages of life. **360 Degrees of Financial Literacy** has a variety of resources teachers can use to teach their classes the basics of financial literacy. These materials can be adapted for the individual needs of each group which would give the educator flexibility as to the amount of time he or she deems necessary for a specific topic.

Parent Engagement and Education

A lack of effective engagement between parents and school corporations is an issue across the nation. In Indiana, recent discussions have emphasized the importance of addressing this challenge. Increased parental involvement in the education of their children can often lead to large improvements in the quality of learning experienced by the students. Not only can grades improve, but also social skills and self esteem. Parents benefit through increased confidence in their decision-making skills.

Existing Programming

- *Effective PTOs:*
    - o Most schools have Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) but only reach a small group of committed parents who have plenty of time to devote to volunteer activities. To make it easier for more parents to attend such meetings, adequate child care services and transportation information can be offered at little or no cost to the school organizations through partnerships with local churches and non-profit organizations, such as local parishes, **Boys and Girls Clubs,** or the **YMCA**.
    - o Schools can also invite parents to become active participants in the education of their children through volunteer work with the school such as administrative functions, tutoring, or chaperoning field trips/events. Through this, schools can make parents feel welcome and respected in the education process.
- *Educating Parents:*

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[5] Financial Literacy for Children: http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/money/index.html

- In Gary, the **Indiana Parenting Institute** offers parents workshops and classes in basic parenting skill development, financial responsibility, and effective family communication. Additionally, the IPI offers an online forum called **ParentChat** through which parents can openly voice their problems and receive feedback from professionals as well as other parents.
- The **No Parent Left Behind** program in South Bend provides parents with a way to bridge parenting skills and academic success, working with local parents to ensure that their children have the home support they need to grow academically.

Drug and Alcohol Use

The use and abuse of drugs and alcohol is a major problem facing the American education system. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, there was an increase in the use of a variety of drugs in 10th grade students across the United States in 2001. The most recent data from by the National Institute on Drug policy from 2007 reports that 35.9% of 12th grade students have used an illicit drug in the past year and 41% have had alcohol in the past thirty days. Unfortunately, this problem arises due to a multitude of reasons and will not be solved quickly. That said, there are steps that can be taken by school corporations, universities, and vocational centers to decrease the likelihood of their students' involvement in drug and alcohol abuse. Every year, more schools are trying to implement new and innovative programs to address this growing problem. According to research conducted at a variety of universities across the nation, there is a concrete connection between student engagement in school activities and the risk of falling into drug use and abuse[6]. Overall, students who are involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to participate in activities involving drug and alcohol abuse.

Existing Programming

- *Community Centers:*
  - Thousands of schools across the country are utilizing a federal program called **21st Century Learning Centers**[7] in which community centers are given grants to help cover the cost of offering students with an educational environment during non-school hours. Encouraging schools to formalize partnerships with these centers can help them raise students' math and reading skills while providing a safe, positive environment for after school care.

- *Alternative Strategies:*
  - Strategies such as longer school hours or year-round schooling present a shifting approach to ensuring that students are provided with safe after school environments. Numerous traditional public schools and districts throughout the state have begun implementing such strategies, as have many charter, private, and alternative schools.

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[6] More information: http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cy/other/fs9932.pdf

[7] For more information about this grant program: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html

- *Student Leadership:*
    - o Another creative approach to keeping students away from drugs and alcohol is a program called **Operation Snowball**[8]. With chapters across the world, Operation Snowball teaches participants leadership, communication, and community engagement skills in order to prevent at-risk individuals from turning to drugs and alcohol. The community-sponsored events typically last one to four days and are filled with workshops, speakers, and small group activities to encourage participants to be a positive influence in society. The program targets a variety of age groups, from preschool to senior citizens making it an excellent resource for schools to use to connect a community through positive engagement.

Community Engagement

As school corporations, colleges, and vocational training centers across the country seek to reprioritize their scopes of service and find operational efficiencies, administrators should look to the immediate community for help. This includes faith-based, nonprofit, and private organizations that can help these schools and centers yield better outcomes on the services they provide to their clients – Indiana's students. Roundtable participants expressed frustration with the general lack of community involvement in the education system, the passive nature of many organizations with respect to school involvement, and the unwillingness or inability of school leadership to formalize these important partnerships.

Existing Programming

- *Adopt-A-School Programs:*
    - o In Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a grassroots effort has transformed the public schools in the area by forging partnerships between the education system and the private sector. This program, aptly named "**Adopt a School**"[9], currently has 90 organizations including banks, bookstores, and sororities functioning as adopters of all the area's public schools. The adopters offer career workshops in the schools, sponsor academic awards, donate equipment, and help with the general activities of the school.
        - ▪ A similar program in Indiana has been started by Delta Tau Delta, a national college fraternity. Their large service project is also in the Adopt a School model[10]. Although their program is typically organized by members of the fraternity, a similar project could be expanded to organize smaller community groups who may not have the financial resources to

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[8] For more information regarding Operation Snowball, please visit: http://www.os-iti.org/docs/Accreditation_booklet_2010.pdf

[9] To learn more about the Tuscaloosa, AL program, visit: http://www.tuscaloosachamber.com/aas/

[10] To learn more about the Delta Tau Delta program, visit: http://www.delts.org/leadership/adopt.html

provide supplies for a school. These organizations can volunteer to help in administrative and general functions of the school such as filing, taking phone calls, landscape work, coaching, and teacher assistance.

Conclusion

A number of interesting and thought-provoking perspectives were shared through the Education Roundtable hosted in April and while the challenges that Indiana's schools face are significant, they present a wide array of opportunities for transition and growth as our state seeks better and more efficient ways to educate. As noted above, there are important strategies being undertaken in Indiana and throughout the country that have brought together school and private-sector resources for local achievement. As several participants stated during this exercise, the goal for local school districts should be not to recreate the wheel but to tailor existing services and programs to meet their specific needs. Each region of the state faces unique obstacles, but sharing experiences, resources, and information is critical if Indiana is to develop a comprehensive statewide approach.

Helpful Resources

Cultural Issues
FMHI Diversity Plan: http://intra.cbcs.usf.edu/Diversity/DiversityResources.cfm
Free, Online Cultural Competency resources: http://ea.niusileadscape.org/lc
Cultural Competency Resources for Indiana: http://peo.soe.umich.edu/

Job Skills and Resources
Financial Literacy for Children: http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/money/index.html
Junior Achievement: http://www.ja.org/default.asp
Indiana Bankers Association Consumer Tips: http://www.indianabankers.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=375
360 Degrees of Financial Literacy: http://www.360financialliteracy.org/

Parent Engagement and Education
Indiana University Southeast bilingual program: http://homepages.ius.edu/MHERDOIZ/newnpages/Nn-Parents.htm#top

Drug and Alcohol Use
Operation Snowball: http://www.os-iti.org/docs/Accreditation_booklet_2010.pdf
National Institute on Drug Abuse- Prevention Report: http://www.nida.nih.gov/pdf/prevention/RedBook.pdf
Resources for starting and maintaining an afterschool program: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/index.cfm

Community Engagement
Tuscaloosa, AL Adopt a School program, visit: http://www.tuscaloosachamber.com/aas/
Delta Tau Delta Adopt a School program, visit: http://www.delts.org/leadership/adopt.html