

Soft Skills Certification Program

Over the years Daviess County has used a variety of programs to focus on student acquisition of the soft skills necessary for success in the workplace. Unfortunately, most have lost steam or changed direction over time. As we approached this application for Work Ready Community status, it was with the sense that creating pathways for students to become work ready in the soft skills was even more relevant and essential now than it was in the past. As the Partnership for Twenty-first Century Skills report states, "Even if every student in the country met our traditional education standards, they would still be woefully underprepared for success beyond high school." We know that new core competencies in the areas of analysis, reasoning, communications, responsibility, teamwork, leadership and critical thinking are needed in the workplace. At the same time, we are very much aware that simply informing schools that they must offer additional classes or assume sole responsibility for this work would be counter-productive.. We seek to offer several ways for students to demonstrate their proficiency in the soft skills, but we also seek to make those skills meaningful to employers by requiring that students meet challenging performance goals. This effort must draw on the expertise of both educators and employers if it is to be successful.

A subcommittee of the Work Ready Community group was organized to examine the whole area of "work ethic seals" or "soft skills certifications". It was composed of representatives of public and private P-12 education, postsecondary education, workforce and economic development, OET, the local WIB, business and labor. Although all members were not able to attend all meetings, everyone was kept informed of the discussions via e-mail and asked to review, comment upon and revise the plan which resulted. Business representatives included Angie Dennis of Owensboro Medical Health System, Dayna Reid of US Bank, (OMHS and US Bank are our two largest employers apart from the school systems), Janice Tomblinson of MPD Inc., Mike Baker, former plant manager at Aleris Rolling Mill, Mark Maddox of Unilever, and Larry Boswell, business manager of IBEW 1701. Additionally, input was gathered from Ryan Ison, Richard Basham, and Steve Henry of Domtar, Jason Curry of Century, and Lou Jane Miller of Dal-Tile in conjunction with sessions between them and educators on the topic of industry needs. There was unanimity among the employers that job applicants need to exhibit soft skills and that they would value a certification process and would use it to inform the hiring process.

The plan for soft skills certification programs in Daviess County contains multiple measures. In Part I, all high school students seeking the certification will submit verifiable data as objective measures of responsibility, persistence toward goals, teamwork and leadership. Requirements for the senior year include:

- No more than two unexcused absences from school
- No more than two unexcused tardies
- No disciplinary referrals for fighting, vandalism, possession of firearms or illegal substances, or theft
- Grade point average of at least 2.5 with no failures

- Involvement in at least two extracurricular activities including part-time employment and community volunteer projects

Through Part II activities, students will obtain communication skills, an introduction to business concepts, problem solving skills, and critical thinking skills from a menu of approved opportunities. These will include successful completion of a term with a Jr. Achievement company, successful completion of a senior project which involves a structured internship, successful completion of a sequence of Project Lead the Way courses, successful completion of a series of five (5) sessions on soft skills which will be modeled on the EK CEP program for Youth and offered as an extracurricular activity by both the local WIB (for qualifying disadvantaged youth) and the Greater Owensboro Regional Alliance for Education, or through programs emphasizing the Part II skills as developed by schools districts and approved by the Work Ready Community committee. This approach will allow Daviess County to implement the soft skills certification program immediately by reliance on existing measures (JA, PLTW, senior projects) while new pathways are being developed and initiated.

At the postsecondary level, verifiable evidence of on track persistence toward a four (4)-year degree within six (6) years, toward a two (2)-year degree within four (4) years or toward an industry recognized certificate within two (2) years will be accepted as demonstration of responsibility and ability to focus on and reach goals. The colleges have a variety of programs already in place which require a demonstration of communication skills, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving. These include the Dynamic Leadership Institute offered by WKU-O to both its students and those of OCTC. This four (4) part program (see summary in the addendum to this application) fully meets the required elements for a soft skills certificate. Currently one hundred eighty-eight (188) WKU-O and OCTC students are enrolled in Institute courses. A variety of activities are offered through the Career Center at Kentucky Wesleyan College which could be easily adapted to meet program requirements. Likewise, Brescia University offers leadership programs through their business administration division. Successful completion of any of these programs would fulfill the Daviess County Soft Skills Certificate requirements once they have been reviewed and approved by the Work Ready Community committee.

During the spring of 2012, the Work Ready Community team will initiate the new soft skills certificates at the high schools level through information sessions with school counselors and through providing materials to introduce parents and students to the program. Qualifying students will be urged to apply for the certification. The first recipients will graduate in May, but they will necessarily be limited to students currently participating in existing programs like JA, PLTW and senior projects. The goal is to present at least thirty (30) high school soft skills certificates this first year.

Teachers in the Work Place, a professional development experience sponsored by the Greater Owensboro Regional Alliance for Education which provides groups of educators the opportunity to visit in cutting edge industries and discuss skill requirements with their managers, will continue. The cadre of educators typically includes high school

teachers, adult education instructors, and college professors. The visits have proved to be eye-opening for the participants as they see first hand the complexities of entry-level job skills and hear directly from the employers about the soft skills they seek in employees. A companion program from industry executives to visit in high schools and colleges will be initiated in the fall of 2012. These programs are designed to promote dialog about all the requirements of the workplace as schools endeavor to concentrate their efforts on ensuring that all graduates are college and career ready.

At the postsecondary level, information about the new soft skills certification will be provided to students and advisors in anticipation that the first certificates will be awarded in the spring of 2013. To facilitate this implementation, the Greater Owensboro Regional Alliance for Education will host a luncheon meeting in the spring of 2012 for the four college academic deans with representatives of business and labor to offer an opportunity for a frank discussion about workplace expectations. Additionally, those registering with the *Owensboro Works* database, who already must present Work Keys scores and/or college degree information, will be given the opportunity to indicated their Soft Skills Certificate attainment, or progress toward it, as a part of their profile. *Owensboro Works* links job seekers and employers through an easy-to-use database system. It is free to participants and provides confirmation of demonstrated skills and training of job applicants. Owensboro Works is a partnership of the City of Owensboro, Daviess County Fiscal Court, Owensboro Community and Technical College, and Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation.

The Soft Skills Certification program will be presented in information sessions to a variety of stakeholders, including the boards of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp., the Chamber of Commerce, the Owensboro Council of Labor, and the Owensboro SHRM during 2012. The goal is to enlist at least ten (10) new employers, in addition to those who have already signed on, as partners who will recognize the soft skills certificate as a part of the hiring process.

During the 2012-2013 school year new or revised school-based programs for high school students (as approved by the Work Ready Community committee) and the extracurricular offerings by the Greater Owensboro Regional Alliance for Education will be initiated. And the first opportunities for disadvantaged youth to access the new program through the summer work program hopefully will occur in the summer of 2012. The Part 2 skills in communication, business concepts, problem solving and critical thinking will also be incorporated into the courses offered to students who choose to participate in the new Technical Academy which will open in 2012. (The Academy, a part of the Community Campus Initiative, will draw students from the Daviess County, Owensboro, Hancock County high schools.)The goal is to increase the number of high school certificates awarded to seventy-five (75) and to award at least thirty (30) postsecondary certificates in the spring of 2013. At least ten (10) additional supportive employers who will accept the Soft Skills Certificate as evidence of employability skills will be added during this school year.

In future years, the goal is to increase the number of certificates awarded by 10% each year until we award at least two hundred (200) high school and seventy-five (75) postsecondary certificates annually. Additional employers who recognize the value of the certification process and agree to give it weight in hiring decisions will be added annually. Employers will be able to rely on the quality of the certificate program, as well as its continuation, because of its affiliation with the Greater Owensboro Regional Alliance for Education which includes all four (4) of the college presidents in the county, six (6) school superintendents, business and labor representatives, workforce and economic development specialists, elected officials and education advocates. A standing committee of the Alliance will focus exclusively on the soft skills certification programs to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of both regional employers and local students. Gary Keller, a retired high school principal who recently worked as a consultant in the career and technical education branch of the Southern Regional Education Board, will serve as committee chair.