



## School-to-Work Revisited

By Linda Holloway

Remember School-to-Work? It was that federal program meant to change schools from centers of academic learning to job-training centers. You haven't heard much about it lately, but it is definitely alive and well. It's still happily restructuring our schools and is meant to restructure our economy – from free enterprise to a planned economy.

Just to refresh your memories here is the history of federal laws enacted to mandate this program. In 1994 Goals 2000 mandated national goals which brought us national standards; in that same year the School-to-Work Opportunity Act was passed to restructure schools to become job training sites; the Workforce Investment Act was passed in 1998 which created a nationwide network of appointed workforce development boards to determine what job skills students needed. All of these were based on the SCANS report which listed *international* job skill standards. These three pieces of legislation melded education, government, and business together with the federal government driving the "reform." Students will be trained in jobs that are deemed necessary for industry in each state. Local control has morphed into local compliance.

School-to-Work has had many names. Here are some red flag terms: school-to-career, career clusters, authentic learning, authentic testing, and the newest one is small learning communities. Every state has taken the money carrot so each state must assure that it will follow the law to restructure schools. Former Gov. Bill Graves brought School-to-Work to Kansas by executive order, as did many other governors. Since it bypassed the State Legislature and State School Board, it came in quietly and without debate or even discussion. Gov. Graves also appointed the workforce development boards. Wouldn't it be nice if we, the people, had been privy to this legislation?

School-to-Work requires that students choose a career by 8th grade, and the rest of their school time will be spent learning a narrow curriculum that will prepare them for an entry job in their career of "choice." The Workforce Development Boards are responsible to communicate to schools which industries need workers and what the necessary skills are.

If this planned economy sounds familiar but foreign, it's because socialist and communist countries have tried it only to see it fail. Even China is now trying experiments with capitalism. Why would we, in America, be interested in foisting such a system on our children and on our country? We, the people, have not had a chance to debate this. It's law.

When did we ever have the discussion and make the decision that public schools are to become job training centers with facilitators instead of centers with teachers providing a broad-based liberal arts education? What's going on in your high schools? Are students being asked or required to choose a career path and then placed on that path? What happens if their career choice doesn't fit nicely into the career clusters? What if they actually don't know what career they want to pursue at the age of 13? (Imagine that!)

Because School-to-Work has met with some resistance, the feds keep changing the name. It's like a shell game, but STW is under every shell. The latest term that seems to indicate School-to-Work is in place is Small Learning Communities. These sound wonderful. Large high schools are divided into smaller "communities," and the students and teachers stay together for the entire high school career. Students are placed in communities that represent career clusters, i.e., business, health, hospitality. One of the high schools in Kansas City, Kansas has put this system into place with the help of a local foundation. Foundations seem to play a big part in restructuring schools by giving them money to try a new program. It's not clear if the foundations understand the full picture or even if the schools understand the full picture. It seems like a good way to improve student learning. Two big questions are, "What are the students learning? What if the students and their parents don't want to play school this way?"

No Child Left Behind is the massive education bill promoted and passed under the Bush administration. It does nothing to stop School-to-Work, and it has brought even more power over local schools to the federal level. It requires accountability, which is a good thing. However, accountability to the Feds flies in the face of the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment to our Constitution – just like School-to-Work does. This country was built on freedom and capitalism. Both are being jeopardized by the federalization of our children's education.