

Focus Group Report
Educational Attainment

October 30, 2002

The Horizon Project

Focus for this group

- The focus of this group was education: How to enhance the educational attainment of our young people to prepare them for the high-skill jobs of the future. Do we want to pursue a publicly supported college or university in Elkhart County?

Composition

- This group included public school administrators, social service executives, school volunteers, business executives, and local government officials. Eight persons were present.

Vision for the future

- **No excuses for failure:** we need to take all the excuses away from kids for not succeeding by providing the resources and opportunities needed for success.
- **Involvement of parents:** we already know that parents need to be more involved; families are very important anchors for children.
- **Anchors for students:** students need to have anchors in the school, people who know their parents – a network of relationships and familiarity. In the past many teachers in the Elkhart schools were from Elkhart, but now most new teachers are not. Who are the other anchors in the schools today?
- **The value of cultural diversity:** emphasize the value of diversity; point out where we excel over Penn. All grade schools now have more cultural diversity than in the past.
- **People skills:** train children and youth to have good people skills.
- **Think positive:** take a positive approach.

Concerns about education

- **Selection of school districts:** people select school districts that appear to do a better job. What information do we give to employers about our school districts? White-collar workers tend to live in Granger. Race is an issue for some in the selection of a school district. People pay 2 or 3 times as much in taxes to live in Granger.
- **Focus for teaching:** teachers focus on passing ISTEP and getting students to graduate; this limits other learning opportunities.
- **Schools are too isolated:** there is a separation between local government and the schools – too many silos. There is also isolation between parents and schools. We need parents who will say to teachers, “I am on your side,” rather than taking an adversarial approach.
- **Impact of Hispanic Immigrants:** Hispanics have grown 465% in the last 10 years. There is there is a perception that they are a workforce that will take the jobs, but not add to the quality of life in the community. Some have the perception that Hispanics pull down the quality of education.
- **Lack of collaboration:** None of the colleges in Elkhart county talk to each other.

- **Interpersonal skills:** some students spend too much time in relative isolation in in-school suspension. This is enforced quiet time and students do not have an opportunity to develop interpersonal skills.

Improvement strategies involving the business community

- **Build shared expectations:** the business community should speak with state officials do develop common standards and expectations for schools.
- **Engage corporate leaders:** They are currently disengaged and do not know what is going on in the Elkhart County schools. Often the managers are in Granger and their workers are in Elkhart County. This has to go beyond Chamber of Commerce involvement. All managers need to be aware of Elkhart School strengths.
- **Reducing social class residential segregation:** change the statistical reporting of educational achievement to reflect socio-economic factors; provide better information to the residential real estate community and encourage them to talk about the quality of life in Elkhart County.
- **Clarify the needs of business:** Ivy Tech is frustrated by what the business community needs; there has been talk about it for 15 years, but not much progress. Bring these two groups together.
- **Company support for training:** companies could expand their pool of skilled workers and increase employee loyalty by providing onsite college education; also bring in apprenticeship programs.
- **Workforce education:** the CAPE grant provides resources for providing education onsite at company locations.

Other improvement strategies

- **Support for students:** develop homework help programs in the schools.
- **Connections for kids:** provide better communication on current programs that help kids in the schools; help kids find what they need; help kids get connected.
- **Tutoring and mentoring in the schools:** mentors develop relationships with kids, see teachers interact with kids, and develop a lot more ownership in the schools. Business people can come in over lunch. What makes a difference with kids is a meaningful relationship with an adult.
- **Parent involvement:** Help parents to be better parents. They get the message that they are inadequate. Help parents be skilled to support education with their kids. Encourage more personal conversation with teachers and parents. Some parents do not attend conferences because they feel inadequate.
- **Consolidate youth agencies:** we have way too many non-profits who do the same things with kids; these programs need to be consolidated.
- **Neighborhood approach:** Recreate a neighborhood approach to schools and see schools as anchor buildings – a safe haven. They close now after 3:00. Could we use the buildings to create neighborhoods? Everyone needs to have a stake in the schools; they are not islands. Include the churches as anchor buildings in neighborhoods.
- **Collaboration with local government:** How can city government help the schools? Local governments often have a hands-off approach to the school. The norm is to keep politics and the schools separate. We do not want the kids to be politicized. Bigger cities are bringing together city government and the schools.
- **School performance measures:** kids need to be compared with expectations in terms of socio/economic class; need more demographics.
- **The value of diversity:** play up the value of diversity in the schools. We should be proud that we are not Penn.

- **Early childhood education:** where are we with the 4 and 5 year olds? They need interpersonal skills training, too. Get involved with the kids earlier. The CAPE initiative is working on early childhood education. The High Scope Program helps children develop interpersonal skills.
- **Funding early childhood education:** Indiana is behind the rest of the county in funding pre-school and all-day kindergarten. We need to lobby the state to fund these programs.

Other perceptions of Elkhart County

Strengths

- **Mentors in schools:** there are currently mentors in schools; these mentors understand the schools and are good advocates. It is powerful when adults come into the schools to join the educational process.
- **Collaboration in Goshen:** the clarion program in the schools did not have space. The Boys and Girls club had the space during the day and provided a place for this educational program. Social services agencies need to interact with the educational world.
- **Anchor in Elkhart:** the Tolson Center is an important anchor for Elkhart youth.
- **Early childhood education:** The Elkhart Community Schools has started full-day kindergarten programs – 5 hours rather than 2 1/2. They have time for teaching interpersonal schools.

Weaknesses

- **Economic history:** in 1977 Elkhart had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the country. The millionaires created jobs that did not require a high school degree. There was not a lot of emphasis on graduating and going on to school.
- **Measuring educational attainment:** we do not have information on socio economic level. The income of parents and the education of mother are major factors predicting the educational performance of children. Is it a negative that our kids are from blue-collar families and they score lower?
- **Poor educational attainment statistics:** Poor educational attainment in Elkhart County cannot be attribute to a large number of Amish. The Amish represent only 3-4 percent of the population. The Amish are usually not counted in educational attainment statistics because they never start high school.
- **Graduation Qualifying Exams:** About 55% of Elkhart 10th graders pass the Graduation Qualifying Exam, while 83% pass at Northwood. A larger percentage will pass at some point during their high school years – over 90% for most schools.
- **Lack of skilled workers:** we are heavy on manufacturing and some manufacturers can't find or retain qualified workers, e.g., no sewers at \$13/hour. It has been hard to find sewers for 20 years.
- **Critique of current workforce:** employees lack basic skills; no interpersonal skills; poor work ethic.
- **Government mandates:** the State and Federal governments drive a lot in education. School-to-work was a big push several years ago. Now it is graduation-qualifying exams, which focus just on math and language arts. Employers want specific skills, but the state is measuring something else.
- **Technology adoption:** we have a lot of entrepreneurs; we do not adopt technology well.
- **Brain drain:** the high achievers leave because the jobs are not here.

Opportunities

- Elkhart Community Schools has young teachers. What do they need?
- Do companies train and invest in their people? Do companies have a long-term commitment?

Areas for Action Planning Teams

- **Business community involvement:** Get business and education to know each other and see how they can work together to support parents and families.
- **Parent involvement in education.**
- **City and school partnerships.**
- **Higher education:** Get the higher education people talking with each other.
- **Early childhood education:** How to get kids ready for the first day of school. Start at birth. Integrate the teaching of interpersonal skills in pre-school and early grade school.

Compiled

11/13/02