

## **On-Ramps to Careers**

### **Executive Summary Discussion Draft**

**January 15, 2013**

Washington, DC should have one of the world's most dynamic metropolitan economies. It has one of the strongest and most resilient labor markets and attracts one of the most highly educated workforces on the planet. Its position as a center of government and international leadership has attracted an abundance of information technology, communications, defense, health, tourism, biotechnology, professional services and other dynamic technology-centered employers. Yet we have an Achilles heel that hinders both our city and region from realizing their potential.

#### **The Problem**

At the heart of the problem -- and the city's toughest challenge -- is the isolation of most of the city's young people from the dynamic economy surrounding them. Despite a regional abundance of good jobs, most young people in the District are exposed to few adults with any rewarding career, much less a well-paid, highly skilled career. One result of this isolation is the widespread belief that those great jobs and careers are for other people's children, not those of the District of Columbia.

If their education does not intentionally support them to see this region's career opportunities as their own, it is no wonder that so many of the District's young people lose faith in education as a path to their future. In the 2010-11 school year, only 59 percent of those in DC's public and public charter high schools graduated within four years, the lowest rate in the nation. Far too many of them live out the adage, on an individual and daily basis that, "Without a vision, the people perish."

If we do not connect the District's young people to the vision of this region's dynamic technology-rich careers, our young people will continue to fall further behind in an already highly stratified labor market.

#### **A Solution**

The District of Columbia needs to build a much stronger bridge between the successful employers and professionals found in our region and the daily reality of our students, for whom the most credible avenues to inspiring careers are sports and entertainment. We need to build an infrastructure to serve as a bridge to the myriad of opportunities this region offers. A prime example and opportunity is to better prepare Washington, DC students for the over 90,000 information technology jobs that employers advertised last year.

The purpose of the On-Ramps to Careers initiative is to make career paths in such high demand occupations faster, more effective and more accessible to Washington

DC students. At its heart is a set of mechanisms that better connect DC high school and college students to regional employers. These connections can help them see the value of their academic courses and soft skills like teamwork and self-discipline in the context of real jobs with a future. Without this connection, the talents of thousands of young people in the District of Columbia go wasted for lack of guidance, vision and educational opportunity.

The On-Ramps to Careers strategy begins by organizing employer leadership and an intermediary to give students much clearer exposure to viable technology career paths and to help educators make more effective use of student efforts and public investments. By arming students with a) inspiring career goals, b) guidance from adults in those careers, and c) faster and more affordable educational pathways, we can reclaim more of our young people's motivation to learn, adults' motivation to teach, and everyone's opportunities to contribute to the regional economy.

### **Organization and Functions**

The planned initiative will be housed in a non-profit organization with an independent advisory board of employers from technology and other high demand industries and their key education partners. The board will recruit and organize one to three working-groups of employer and educator leaders that build out articulated programs of study for one of the region's in-demand occupation clusters, starting with IT and expanding to include others such as healthcare, finance or engineering. The working groups will help identify industry standards, improve program curricula, and sequence career pathway courses across high schools and colleges. It will also marshal mentoring and work-based learning experiences connected to programs of study and employer-recognized stackable credentials. And it will advocate for policies, such as school credits that will reward students for their efforts to gain workplace experience and skills.

The implementation staff will be led by an executive program director focused on employer engagement and early college credit initiatives. In the start-up year, the director will manage two career navigators, each working with students, teachers and employer mentors in two to three District of Columbia high schools. The team and programming would focus on IT occupations in that first year and expand based on demand. By year three, staff would grow to five, to include an additional career navigator for each additional participating high school. The primary roles and functions of the board and implementation team include:

#### Assist employers and educators to work more effectively together:

- Facilitate employer and mentor involvement in schools
- Influence and support career pathway education programs that lead to credentials of value in the labor market
- Organize internships and other experiences that show students the connections between their learning, self-discipline and workplace demands

Assist secondary and post-secondary educators to strengthen career pathways together:

- Identify needs and design pathways that more rapidly prepare young people for a variety of existing occupations
- Improve the bridges from high school to postsecondary education

Provide capacity building and labor market and policy analysis to partners:

- Analyze regional labor market needs and assets to deepen schools' understanding of jobs in demand and their requirements
- Create shared solutions to policy and logistical obstacles, including technology use for work based experience
- Collect student outcomes data to monitor and improve performance

### **Benefits and Outcomes**

The benefits and outcomes for participating students and education institutions will include increased enrollment in high demand and high technology programs, increased student attendance, increased retention and graduation rates, increased post-secondary credential attainment, and better job outcomes for graduates. The benefits and outcomes for participating employers will include stronger entry and mid-level professional job candidates, fresh creativity in the workplace, improved morale among mentor employees, and ensuring that young people are an asset rather than a challenge for the city and region.

On-Ramps to Careers will work with the students of at least two DC high schools in the first year and at least four high schools by year three. It will expose over one thousand DC students to stronger career advising, industry-influenced curriculum and coursework that starts them on a post-secondary credential of value in the labor market and it will put over 500 DC students in employer workplaces as On-Ramps to Careers interns or mentees over the period.

### **Earning the Future Internship Fund**

Impacting student's vision and motivation for learning is a critical element of the On-Ramps to Careers solution. Yet young people also need practical supports, especially given the very real financial obstacles most of them face once they take on ambitious career goals. So a complementary proposal to the On-Ramps to Careers initiative is an "Earning the Future Fund" to help students see immediate results, as well as future results, if they put in the hard work of preparing themselves for technology careers.

This proposed fund would support a \$200 per month credit that students would earn for each month that they work at least 20 hours as an intern with a qualifying employer. The credit would go into an account to pay for the student's future

expenses toward postsecondary degrees and industry credentials. This fund will also provide approximately eighty dollars per month for internship transportation costs. These internships and incentives provide a critical link between the worlds of school and work and will benefit participating students, schools and employers.

### **Financing**

Long-term sustainability for this work will come from local corporate and community foundations, government and direct employer contributions tied to quality interns. Foundation and government support will initially fund the 12-month start up phase of recruiting and organizing additional employers, designing highly effective and affordable pathways, establishing agreements between high-schools and post-secondary institutions, removing policy and other barriers, and establishing programs. Employer contributions are expected to grow gradually in the following years as employers begin to see the return on investment.

### **Summary**

Though this initiative is at its genesis, it has already attracted secondary, post-secondary, community and employer leaders in the Washington, DC region. It adapts international research and best practices to our region and strategically invests in its greatest assets to address its toughest challenges and opportunities. Those assets include its robust employer community, inspired and effective educators and the largely under-developed and un-tapped vision and motivation of its young people.

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