

An Introduction to the Employability Report Card Project by Ellen Kaskie

The name is perhaps a bit misleading in its mildness: The Employability Report Card Project. Because of course “employability” is not a project at all, but a concrete necessity in the economy – a wall, if you will, that stands between success and failure for workers and businesses alike. Business must have workers who can leap, climb, or claw their way over that wall in order to thrive, and it is not a “project” for them or for the nation. It is a matter of survival.

Potential workers have to deal with that same wall. First, are they able to scale it with the educational preparation schools have given them? If *yes*, will they be able to continue to meet the challenges they find on the other side? Why? If *no*, why not? Are they motivated to try again or did we neglect to teach them that? What else did we neglect to teach them? Could they have learned it at school? Should they have learned it at home? What is “it” and why do they lack it? For these workers, it is also a matter of survival; employability pays the bills, raises the children, supports the businesses, moves the economy.

So the Employability Report Card Project is not a mild, scissors-and-tape, papier-mache project at all, but an initiative taken in dead earnest, for profit -- the nation’s profit (or the world’s, or the village’s), which is based on the individual’s ability to meet the needs of business.

At Innovative Education Management, Inc., we are not just staring at the wall and the collection of bodies at its foot while the businesses on the other side clamor for more workers to be thrown at it. We are making an effort to determine the degree in which local schools are preparing young people to go to work by engaging in a series of conversations with business leaders. We are challenging parents and teachers to engage in these conversations as well. All of us are motivated to maximize the potential of our students to find meaningful employment, to succeed, to grow, to flourish.

In the coming months, you will find us speaking to CEOs, human resources professionals, hiring managers and small business owners to determine if – and how – our educational system is meeting their needs. We will examine educational developments – not for conceptual elegance, not for political correctness – in an effort to find practical steps we can take now to start meshing our young people’s core learning with the reality that this core is only the beginning of what must be a lifetime of learning and growth. And what about parents? Buffeted by waves of mandatory testing, mandatory self-esteem enhancement and agenda-driven curricula, they are trying to motivate and encourage successful learning habits in children whose intellectual curiosity is self-fed by the internet because it is not led and developed by the schools. We will ask parents what you are doing and what we may do to strengthen and assist you. These three elements – business, the educational system and parents – will form and inform our Employability Report Card Project.

Although the United States has consistently, over the past twenty years, achieved the lowest scores among industrialized nations in science and math with students who consistently (mis)perceive themselves to have placed at the top, the employability struggle is going on elsewhere as well. Lennart Morgan is addressing this struggle in Sweden, which also has nine years of compulsory education and yet

has businesses complaining that entry-level employees cannot do basic math. He finds the isolation of the schools from the community of business and parents frightening. "We must help the schools open up . . . we must become less defensive. . . . Because we are not talking to each other we are not aware of how dangerous this is." He finds teachers frustrated and unfulfilled, looking for their feedback from the students as they don't trust or value the mandatory testing process. Yet students are certainly not reliable or effective judges of how good an education they are receiving! To coin a phrase, they don't know any better. "The rational and profitable thinking model that the business world has does not exist in the education world, and this is a detriment to the students as we cannot foster and get them ready for the real world where they will spend the majority of their lives."

Sound familiar?

There is a debate raging among educators right now, a debate that we must not allow them to wage in isolation. Business leaders and parents need to evaluate the two sides and weigh in themselves with opinions formed by real world experience. Both sides of the debate acknowledge that our schools are failing. Education reformer E.D. Hirsch, with his Core Knowledge curriculum in use now in 718 schools in 45 states, is challenging the "teaching to the test" mentality of public education. His question: why are we using "random knowledge" rather than real-world information to teach children how to infer meaning in material and to solve problems? His answer: a curriculum rich in history, science and math so that students acquire not only facts but a foundation for understanding all sorts of information. This information base can then continue to expand throughout life. The results: in one public school example, 87% of the students met or exceeded state standards of math and English – without "teaching to the test."

The other side of the debate finds this curriculum a "bunch o' facts" offering breadth instead of depth. Harvard's Howard Gardner says that the Core Knowledge curriculum "seems destined to deaden . . . the vitality of the culture for most students." But what is this "depth" this side of the debate is speaking of? It should be organized around projects and questions, according to Alfie Kohn, author of **The Schools Our Children Deserve**, allowing students to discover ideas rather than covering a prescribed curriculum. Hmmm. How can students with no base of knowledge "discover" meaningful "ideas" for themselves that will give them a foundation on which to build successful careers and families in the future?

It is vital that questions such as these not remain to be decided and acted upon solely by professional educators. Educating our young people for rich and employable lives (I choose to let that pun stand!) is not an interesting theoretical exercise for a self-chosen few. We, the community of parents and employers, must join the debate. Lennart Morgan likened schools to the "jumping-off place [to the rest of their lives] for students – but right now we are dropping them off a cliff without the drive to keep soaring; we burn them out and program them wrong for the flight of their lives." Wow.

The Employability Report Card Project is a beginning. Listen to what employers have to say. Learn what teachers think. Find out what communities around the world are doing to get involved in focusing education on the desired outcome – lifelong learners – rather than arguing about the process. Again, this is not a rainy day project, but a serious initiative. Please take part. We will post recordings of our exchanges and interviews with diverse professionals, volunteers, officials and

parents. Please read and listen to them. We have developed a survey. Please respond. A discussion forum is online. Please participate. We have links to resources and reading materials. Please use them.

We are all up against the same wall. Perhaps the best way to scale it is to stand on each other's shoulders and shake hands across it at the top. The future of the nation (or the world, or the village) surely depends on it.