



Piloting the “Talent Cities” Solution

The challenge in education is engagement and relevance. Students often find themselves confused about how their classes connect to the real world of work; more often than not leading to disengagement. This challenge follows students’ into college and the workplace.

For schools, the goal has been to graduate students ready for college primarily, with a nod to career. For employers and entrepreneurs, the goal is access to ready-talent. For chambers of commerce and workforce development agencies, the goal is the matching of talent supply and demand to ensure that businesses are attracted to the region and empowered to grow. The disconnect between these goals is typically addressed retroactively after students have graduated high school (even college), after a business posts a job opening, after workers are let go.

The solution to this disconnect or “talent-gap” is to create a talent development pipeline that aligns to the needs of businesses and entrepreneurs. In other words, shift the focus of students in the K-12 setting towards building a skill set that prepares them for success in the world of work; with higher education positioned as a step towards their ultimate career. This changes the typical statement “college and career” to “career through continuous learning in higher education and beyond.” This new model, called Talent Cities, was developed by Gerri Burton from New Learning Ventures. The Talent Cities model is in the initial stage of implementation in partnership with the Vista Chamber of Commerce and local businesses. The power of the model is that the talent development pipeline begins in middle school and focuses on the essential skills and high priority sectors identified by the San Diego Workforce Partnership.

Vista Unified middle school students assess their 21st essential skills, research high priority sectors of the business economy, visit key employer sites and share what they learn with their peers and parents. This is a community solution that aligns education and employment by promoting shared discussion and shared language about talent. Rather than being on the outside of education looking in, employers are able to influence curriculum, instruction and data analytics to promote smart thinking around individual career choices students make. For Vista students, the approach offers equity of access with many students experiencing their first visits to the world of work where they see, first hand, the value of developing essential skills. At Vista Unified, student agency is the new normal and lifelong learning is appreciated by students at an early age. School becomes more relevant and their sights are set beyond college to a career that aligns to their talents and regional economic development. Building a Talent City is a blended approach that has the potential to expand students’ expectations about their place in the world of work.

The first pilot, conducted in Fall 2016, was highly successful and this March will be scaled to include hundreds of middle schoolers and to offer an international component, Talent Bridges.

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