

Becoming a Work Ready Community is our best Economic Development Strategy



November 9, 2011

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The future of Preble County's economic health lies in the quality and readiness of its workforce. A competitive workforce helps Preble County compete for new business and helps existing business expand. A November 2010 survey of corporate real estate executives in Site Selection magazine revealed that "workforce skills" was the number one item that mattered most when making site selection decisions, ranking ahead of "state and local tax scheme"ⁱ. The economic growth that may result from a skilled workforce increases the tax base, in turn, providing for infrastructure needs and public services.

Unfortunately, Preble County faces the same danger experienced by other rural areas. Competition for jobs is fierce; globally, interstate, and intrastate. Rural areas may be at a disadvantage. "Many rural areas can't attract workers because there aren't any jobs, and businesses won't relocate there because there aren't enough qualified workers. So they are caught in a downward spiral," says Mark Mather, associate vice president of the Population Reference Bureau, a research group in Washington, D.C.ⁱⁱ

One could argue that the symptoms of a downward trend already exist in Preble County. According to census data, the Preble County population decreased slightly from 2000 to 2009. Meanwhile, the median age increased significantly from 37.5 years in 2000 to 40.6 years in 2009ⁱⁱⁱ. This suggests that young people are getting educated K-12, only to leave the county and not return. A key comparison of two educational attainment levels for the population age 25 or higher seems to confirm the loss of talent that we are experiencing. Among the 25 or older age group, Preble County exceeds the U.S. average for high school graduates (85.6% compared to the U.S. average of 84.6%). However, among the same demographic age group, the percentage of Preble County residents with educational attainment of Bachelor's degrees or higher is only 11%. This is less than half the national average of 27.5%^{iv}. With a declining population, this again suggests that young people are graduating from high school and leaving.

Additionally, the data for Labor Inflow and Outflow depicts that Preble County had 14,673 residents were employed in private sector jobs in 2009. Among the same demographic of Preble County private sector workers, almost three out of every four (73.7%) traveled outside of the county to work^v.

Our ability- or inability- to respond to this declining trend will determine the economic future of the county and its residents for generations. The time to act is now. While other cities, counties, and states have implemented workforce development programs to help retain employers and attract new business, the State of Ohio has been slow to act decisively. We must raise our standards to match competition from other communities.

We can do better, both for ourselves and for the next generation. Improving educational attainment is a worthy goal, but it is not enough. Besides, the problem isn't so much that Preble County residents aren't achieving higher educational attainment levels. Rather, it is that they are leaving the county to obtain higher education and not coming back.

Improving the skills of our current and emerging workforce is our best economic development strategy right now. It increases productivity and makes us more attractive to site selectors and their business clients.

Consequently, the Preble County Development Partnership, Inc. has set a goal for Preble County to become a Work Ready Community by the end of 2013. Achieving this goal will make Preble County a leader in the State of Ohio for Work Readiness. By becoming a Work Ready Community, individuals will have an opportunity to assess and improve their present skill set, and also earn a National Career Readiness Certificate.

Work Ready programs have been used successfully by many communities and states to improve worker skills, reduce employer training and hiring costs, market communities, and attract new business. Notably, the State of Kentucky recently enacted a statewide Certified Work Ready Community program even as the northern Kentucky region draws industry and jobs away from Ohio. The State of Louisiana's Fast Start program, hastened to help rebuild the state's economy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, is nationally acclaimed for matching skills and training to employer needs and is marketed aggressively on business cable television.

In our case, we have already begun Work Keys testing with the help of a variety of partners within the Workforce Development Committee of the Preble County Development Partnership, Inc. The Preble County Job Center began testing the unemployed two months ago. The Preble County Educational Services Center has helped coordinate Work Keys testing among a population of students. The Sinclair Community College and Miami Valley Career Technology Center are also helping to coordinate segments of the population for testing.

The standard we have set for ourselves mirrors the State of Oklahoma standard:

1. **Existing workforce** with Career Readiness Certification – *To be an Certified Work Ready Community, a minimum of 3% of the existing workforce must be credentialed with CRC's.*

2. **Available, or unemployed, workforce** with Career Readiness Certificates –*Certified Work Ready Communities are required to have a minimum of 25% of their available workforce Career Readiness Certified.*

3. **Emerging Workforce** –*A minimum high school graduation rate of 82% will be required to become an Oklahoma Certified Work Ready Community or a minimum of 82% of high school seniors with CRC's will be required to become an Oklahoma Certified Work Ready Community.*

We also want to provide assessments to all high school juniors and help them earn Career Readiness Certificates as early as possible.

We recognize that Work Keys testing and Work Ready Communities are not a panacea. However, it is a solid start. The commitment to become a Work Ready Community shows that the private and public sectors are serious about working together to provide opportunities and grow. In the coming months, we pledge to educate the public on the benefits of Work Keys and update our progress.

If you would like to learn more about Work Keys assessments and job profiling, please see their web site at www.act.org/workkeys . You may also contact Shawnda Combs at the Office of Economic Development at 456-8188 or Matt Appenzeller at the Preble County Chamber of Commerce at 456-4949. We will point you toward one of our community partners.

End Notes:

ⁱ Site Selection. (November 2010). Maps and Charts, What Matters Most. Downloaded from <http://www.siteselection.com/ss/issues/2010/Nov/Cover.cfm> .

ⁱⁱ Yen, Hope. (July 28, 2011). Rural U.S. disappearing? Population share hits low. Associated Press, downloaded from <http://news.yahoo.com/rural-us-disappearing-population-share-hits-low-205818711.html> .

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). American Community Survey. American Fact Finder, downloaded from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFacts?_event=&geo_id=05000US39135&_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US39%7C05000US39135&_street=&_county=Preble+County&_cityTown=&_state=&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=050&_submenuId=factsheet_1&ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_SAFF&_ci_nbr=null&q_r_name=null®=null%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry= .

^{iv} Ibid

^v Search Preble County at <http://lehdmap.did.census.gov/>