

United Way of Southwest Virginia *Operation Tomorrow's Workforce*

Addressing the gap between the worlds of learning and work

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By 2040 Virginia could be the 10th most populous state in the nation, but not in Southwest Virginia, which is projected to be the state's fastest-shrinking region. Some locations in Southwest Virginia could lose as much as 30% of their population within the next two decades.¹

A recent local survey reveals nearly one in four Southwest Virginia residents are considering leaving.

Among those considering a move, forty-three percent say they would leave for better job opportunities.²



As people continue to leave the region so do the children. Since 2009 more than 6,600 students have not returned to Southwest Virginia schools.³ Of those remaining, more than 3,000 youth ages 16-19 are not working or enrolled in school.⁴

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While local employers continue to be challenged to fill openings, many report high turnover and the lack of motivated, skilled employees. But Southwest Virginia's percent of participation in the region's labor pool is averaging less than 50%.⁵

Just recently, one Southwest Virginia employer shared that in the past quarter they hired 295 people, but lost more than 220 of them just to maintain a crew of 165. The company's costs in administrative, recruiting and training time for loss of these new hires was more than \$220,000 in one quarter alone.

These are the exact problems that hinder Southwest Virginia employers' ability to innovate, grow and start new strategic initiatives.⁶

For more than 50 years United Way has been in Southwest Virginia. Needs have shifted in Southwest Virginia during this time and United Way has responded to these changes, shifting focus from treating symptoms to addressing root causes. Moving from being recognized as a fund raiser and distributor to an organization focused on bottom-line results: the lives that are changed and the communities that are shaped. Today, United Way of Southwest Virginia fights

for the health, education and financial stability of every person in Southwest Virginia because they are the building blocks for a good quality of life.

This change has been managed entirely by local Southwest Virginia leadership, relying on national and local research to make this shift to a community impact model to achieve the greatest good right here in Southwest Virginia. In addition to change in focus, the organization has moved to a more regional approach through six different mergers and collaborations and now serves 13 counties and 2 cities covering more than 5,000 square miles of Virginia, nearly 15% of the commonwealth.



Through these combined regional efforts, United Way of Southwest Virginia is creating scalable and sustainable solutions. Solutions such as Smart Beginnings and Virginia Quality Initiatives, which are working across the region with more than 117 early childcare providers to ensure that more children come to kindergarten prepared and ready to succeed. Solutions such as Backpacks Unite, a health initiative that provides nutritious weekend meals to 35 schools serving over 1,000 elementary and middle school aged students during the school year, so they come to school Monday well-fed and ready to learn.

United Way identifies needs and solves problems no one organization can solve alone.

The current problem

Today, Southwest Virginia faces a new problem. Employers, educational institutions and youth live in different worlds and have essentially different perspectives. When asked if youth are

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prepared for work, the responses are quite different. According to McKinsey and Company, approximately 70% of educators think yes, youth are prepared for work, while less than 50% of employers agree.⁷ **There is a gap between the worlds of learning and work in Southwest Virginia.**

United Way is implementing a true cradle-to-career continuum: a talent pipeline that prepares the next generation for the jobs of tomorrow, supplying businesses with skilled workers, building a robust competitive economy.

But in order to do this, there are two major challenges that need to be addressed.

Challenge #1

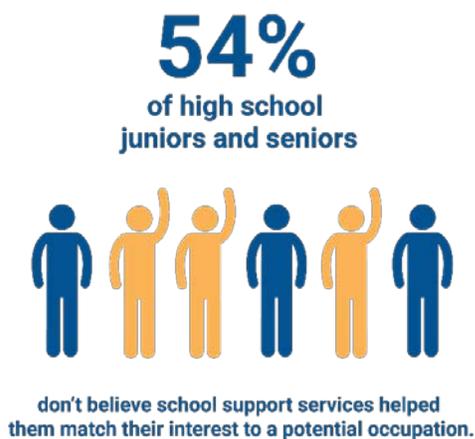
There is a lack of career awareness of local careers and jobs among students.

Every day youth face important decisions that are likely to impact their future. These decisions include deciding on potential career opportunities that can lead to their overall economic self-sufficiency. In the K-12 system, schools are designed to prepare students with essential knowledge to make informed decisions about future careers. Still, many students in Southwest Virginia continue to be unaware of potential careers and the importance of their schooling in shaping their futures. According to a survey by Youth Truth, 54% of high school juniors and seniors don't believe school support services helped them match their interest to a potential occupation.⁸ This lack of awareness and direction comes from overwhelmed school counselors

with too many responsibilities unrelated to career development.⁹

Since 2009, state per student funding to school systems in Southwest Virginia has fallen 14%. Localities have been burdened to take on a larger share of school funding. Local governments in Southwest Virginia invest, on average, 46% above the required state match, but that's still less than half of the state average of 111%. Due to these shortfalls, there are 246 fewer school personnel in Southwest Virginia with more than 16% of the reductions coming from guidance counselor type positions.¹⁰ Budget constraints have left the average school counselor with a 471:1 ratio of

students to counselors, nearly twice the recommended rate set by the American Counseling Association.¹¹



Because of these constraints, youth are uninformed of potential career pathways in Southwest Virginia making them more vulnerable to dropping out of school, unemployment, or even underemployment, with a large sum of education debt and no direction.¹²

Challenge #2

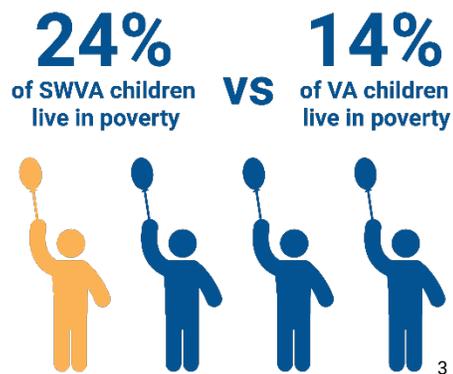
There are insufficient opportunities to provide youth with hands-on learning through real world experiences.

Today's employers not only want to hire people competent in hard skills and academic areas. Today's employers also need to hire people who can think critically, communicate and solve problems collaboratively.

During a recent discussion held at MIT on closing the economic divide, Shawn Bohlen, National Director for Growth and Impact at Year Up, stated, "Most employers say people are hired for skills and fired for attitude and behavior." Bohlen went on to say, "It starts in preschool, learning how to play well with others."¹³

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Many young children in Southwest Virginia do not have parents in the labor force and another half are living in the same household as a grandparent.¹⁴ These same children often don't experience the modeling and the importance of having a job with responsibility. Additionally, some of these same youth have a limited understanding of money management. In fact, all of today's youth are growing up experiencing a culture of debt and easy credit which makes it easier to learn habits that can lead to costly financial mistakes in their future.¹⁵



Learning these skills is a life-long process, and by starting as early as we can, we can help prepare our youth to succeed not just in academics, but in life and the workplace.

Addressing the challenges

We must do two things:

- 1) **Career awareness:** We must work to build more career awareness of local career pathways among youth and educators throughout our region.
- 2) **Hands-on learning:** We must give more youth the opportunity to develop skills through hands-on learning experiences.

To meet the need, United Way of Southwest Virginia is scaling up the Ignite Program.

Ignite Program

Ignite sparks student interest in career opportunities by connecting schools and students with area employers through career awareness and hands-on learning. With a program investment of more than \$250,000 this school year alone, the Ignite Program will expand from serving three pilot schools in the 2016-17 school year to now serving 86 middle and high schools, creating Southwest Virginia's first regional youth workforce development program.

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Career awareness

Ignite builds awareness of local career pathways in Southwest Virginia among youth and educators and provides students in grades 6-12 with state of the art software and curriculum to learn more about their own interests and strengths through comprehensive assessments and career matching. Students will create career and academic plans that parents can now view online.

United Way will also be enhancing teachers' awareness of local employers' workforce needs by implementing teacher employer tours. Right now one-third of employers say they never communicate with education providers.¹⁶ During these tours, education providers and employers will actively step into one another's worlds. Teachers will see firsthand the needs of local employers to have a workforce that can think critically when confronted with real-world problems.

United Way will also help youth discover local opportunities. At the Careers Expo for Youth, more than 4,000 7th graders learn firsthand from industry professionals about jobs and opportunities right here in Southwest Virginia.

Hands-on learning

In addressing the challenge of giving youth the opportunity to develop skills through hands-on experiences, United Way, through Ignite, will deploy strategies to help youth learn Soft Skills, such as: communications skills, problem solving, & critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills and Money Management.

In the area of Soft Skills, United Way has partnered with the U.S. Department of Labor to work with guidance counselors and teachers to implement a curriculum “Skills to Pay the Bills” teaching middle and high school students what soft skills are and why they are important in the workplace.

In helping youth to better learn Money Management, United Way has formed a partnership with Virginia Tech’s Cooperative Extension, where 4,200(+) 8th grade students will now receive a financial simulation called Reality Store. During this activity, students learn how to make financial decisions about their budgets and lifestyles by paying bills and balancing checkbooks, teaching them personal accounting, financial responsibility and the consequences of life choices.

Finally, United Way of Southwest Virginia is currently in the process of researching and developing a plan to pilot apprenticeships through a summer youth work program. Youth who participate in work-based learning are more likely to do better in school, attend college or go to work compared to their peers.¹⁷

As the Annie E. Casey Foundation states, “in the end, work itself is the strongest program.”¹⁸

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Local employers will be critical partners in this effort to share their insight and experience to mentor high school students as they prepare for future careers.

Both of these strategies to build career awareness and develop skills through hands-on learning will help today’s youth prepare for work tomorrow.

Community-wide support

Employer needs in Southwest Virginia are continually changing, and schools are continually asked to do more with less. These challenges will only become more difficult in a 21st century economy. Southwest Virginia will need sector and community-wide solutions. These challenges are not for business, academic or government to solve alone. It will take all stakeholders working together, United, to solve this.

With local support of these new initiatives, United Way will invest \$250,000 annually in the Ignite Program over the next four years. United Way of Southwest Virginia has partnered with 16 school systems at 86 middle and high schools and is reaching over 29,000 students. For less than \$10 per student per year for these efforts, Ignite can bridge the gap and connect schools and students with area employers to better realize students’ potential, preparing them to enter and advance in the region’s workforce.

United Way of Southwest Virginia envisions a region where an education pipeline helps employers recruit high-caliber and diverse talent, employers locate here because Southwest Virginia has the

best workforce in America, and youth no longer need to leave the region to find a good job with a livable wage.

Through a cradle-to-career approach, United Way of Southwest Virginia is creating sustainable solutions to address the challenges facing tomorrow's workforce. United Way is well positioned

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to backbone these efforts and bring them to scale. But, in order to move forward, United Way will need local support and investment.

United Way is inviting schools, businesses and government officials to invest in Southwest Virginia's youth – tomorrow's workforce – through partnership and financial investment. The return on this investment will help create a talent pipeline that prepares the next generation for the jobs of tomorrow, supplying local employers with the skilled workers needed to build a robust competitive economy.

As a human resource manager in Germany said in a recent article from JP Morgan Chase “[Workforce development] has nothing to do with corporate social responsibility; I do this because I need talent.”¹⁹

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