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# School-to-Work: A Larger Vision

**By Dr. Samuel Halperin**

Statewide School-to-Work Conference  
Newport, Rhode Island  
November 4, 1994

**American Youth Policy Forum**  
The Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc.  
Washington, D.C.

*"...the School-to-Work Opportunities Act is a way to rethink what we adults are doing to prepare our young people for success in life. It offers us the opportunity to fundamentally alter the high school experience—which currently is not working well for many, if not most, students."*

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# School-to-Work: A Larger Vision

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**T**hank you for your invitation to help develop Rhode Island's plans for implementation of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (hereafter STWOA). I have no doubt that you will soon win one of the federal implementation grants, grants already awarded to eight other states.

My only doubt is whether your vision will be as large-spirited and as bold as the federal Act itself. Will you seize the opportunity to rethink the essential nature of schooling at the dawn of the 21st Century? Will you construct a total quality *system* in which each of the parts supports and advances the welfare of all the other parts? That is the challenge. That is the opportunity.



## **School-to-Work Opportunities Act: “Historic, Landmark” Legislation**

Five features of the new Act qualify it for designation as “historic,” even “landmark,” legislation:

- 1 Previous federal legislation focussed mostly on the disadvantaged (Job Training Partnership Act, Job Corps, ESEA Title I). STWOA is the most universal, non-means-tested effort to date. It is intended to help *all* students who have not

yet completed high school, regardless of their economic status.

- 2 STWOA is the first federal education legislation to declare that preparation for earning a living is one of the legitimate and important roles of schooling for *all* students, including the college-bound.
- 3 Previous federal legislation implied that learning is the near-exclusive province of the schools. STWOA affirms that learning takes place in families, communities, schools and workplaces. Employers and worksite learning are central in the new legislation. So are parents and community-based organizations. All of these agencies are specifically recognized as major stakeholders and partners in every local STW partnership.
- 4 Previous federal legislation (with the exception of Vocational Education) largely bypassed the high schools. (Title I compensatory education funds, the largest program, are concentrated largely in the early grades.) STWOA focusses on high school and the transition to postsecondary education. While it addresses the needs of all students, it “remembers” the needs of “The Forgotten Half” who are not going to four-year colleges immediately after high school graduation.
- 5 Previous federal legislation provided annual funding over many years. STWOA, accommodating to harsh federal fiscal realities, seeks to leverage change through limited financial incentives. Federal “venture capital” over a seven-to-ten-year period is intended to help you form voluntary partnerships and consortia of all the stakeholders. STWOA also encourages you to re-assess how you are using other

federal, state and local funding streams and, possibly, combine them for greater impact.

Overall, the hope is that the new ways of doing business that you will develop will produce greater student achievement and far greater satisfaction with the graduates of your community's total educational enterprise.

### **What School-to-Work Is Not**

Now, having told you why I think the new Act presents such a large historic challenge, I'd like to emphasize what the Act is *not*.

- \* First, it's not another one of those small federal programs that soon becomes overlaid with reams of federal and state guidelines and regulations. The last thing in the world you need is another categorical program, another "flavor of the month!"
- \* STWOA is not a fancy euphemism for existing programs like vocational education or career exploration, although each of these endeavors has a vital role to play in School to Work.
- \* It's not a way for America to beat the Japanese and Germans in international economic competition.
- \* It's not another tracking device to separate winners and losers in the education race or to offer second-class schooling to students who may not see themselves as college-bound.



### **What School-to-Work Could Be**

Now let me tell you what I think STW *could be* here in Rhode Island and around the country.

Ideally, STW is a systematic, comprehensive, community-wide effort to help all young people (1) prepare for high-skill and high-wage careers, (2) receive top quality academic instruction, and (3) gain the foundation skills to pursue post-secondary education and lifelong learning. I

stress *all* young people, including those with disabilities and those who are headed for a four-year degree at our finest colleges and universities.

When carried out effectively, STW offers a high school experience that challenges and motivates our youth to develop the skills, knowledge and behaviors they need to achieve economic earning power and, in turn, achieve the American dream.

STW will also help to provide American employers with the qualified workers they need. Through new or expanded local partnerships, employers will work with teachers to develop and implement curricula that span both the school and work sites, setting high standards for student performance and credentialing youth for good careers.

To the architects of STWOA, the Act is a way to rethink what we adults are doing to prepare our young people for success in life. It offers us the opportunity to fundamentally alter the high school experience—which currently is not working well for many, if not most, students. It brings high school into alignment with more effective ways of teaching and learning and promises a brighter future for far more young people. It also gives adults far greater personal and professional satisfaction from their work with young people.

***“...the first federal education legislation to declare that preparation for earning a living is one of the legitimate and important roles of schooling for all students, including the college-bound.”***

## A Critique of American High Schools

STWOA was created out of a widespread belief that most high schools are not working well, particularly for the 75 percent of our young people who are unlikely to earn a baccalaureate degree. Consider these contemporary comments on the American high school:

- \* “Most employers look at the high school diploma as evidence of staying power, not academic achievement. They realized long ago that it is possible to graduate from high school in this country and still be functionally illiterate. As a result, the non-college-bound youth know that their performance in high school is likely to have little or no bearing on the type of employment they manage to find.” (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, *America’s Choice: high skills or low wages!*, 1990)
- \* “Most kids think [academic] education methods are torture devices invented by teachers ... they get that idea because they can see that no one in the workplace is doing these things.” (Stephen Hamilton, Cornell University Youth and Work Program.)
- \* “It’s evident that the vast majority of kids in high school are not motivated. We don’t seem to be approaching them in ways that engage them in learning.” (John F. Jennings, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor.)
- \* “Students not bound for college need the most help, receive the least assistance, are equipped with the most limited information, and experience the greatest risks in the job market.” (Gary Orfield and Faith Paul, *High Hopes, Long Odds*, 1994)

- \* Over the twenty-year period from 1967-1987, the percentage of jobs held by workers with less than a high school diploma declined from 40 percent to only 15 percent. Over the same period, inflation-adjusted incomes of families headed by high school graduates without any postsecondary education fell fully 30 percent. Only half of the high school graduates under age 20 and not in college are employed full-time and, worse yet, about one-third of young people fail to find stable employment by the time they reach age 30. (Bureau of Labor Statistics and Paul Osterman of MIT.) (For a larger discussion of these points, see Richard Mendel, *The American School-to-Career Movement: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Foundation Officers*, American Youth Policy Forum, 1994.)

Against this dire and worsening background we know that many well-paying careers do not require a baccalaureate degree. We also know from research (e.g., the SCANS reports, 1991 and 1992, and the *National Assessment of Vocational Education*, 1994) that certain things do pay off in the labor market: (1) cognitive skills, (2) broad technical skills (especially computer literacy and its applications), (3) postsecondary education and, (4) human relations and workplace skills, like getting along with colleagues and supervisors, working well in teams and demonstrating reliability, responsibility and initiative.



### **Basic Premises of School-to-Work**

Building on this knowledge base, STWOA offers no precise blueprint, no road map or rule book. Rather, the new Act is one of the least prescriptive laws on the statute books. It acts like a compass,

pointing to a set of concepts or basic premises. These premises are based on recent research about how people learn best and what employers say young people need in order to cope with a fast-changing world.

- \* **First**, STW is a new way of looking at the development of young people and particularly at their needs in the critical adolescent transition years from high school into further education and the world of work. STW asserts that youth need *active*, not passive learning—in schools, in worksites, in voluntary service. Therefore, STW views the entire community as one great learning laboratory where young people grow, develop and find networks of support.
- \* **Second**, STW is a systematic effort to change the time-based assumptions on which most high schools are currently based. STW says that young people are expected to exhibit or demonstrate mastery of rigorous academic and behavioral skills, not be judged by how many years they have sat in classrooms or how many written tests they have passed by rote memorization. Actual *demonstrations of competence* will be the touchstone of STW.
- \* **Third**, STW builds on extensive research that says that one of the most critical ingredients in young people's success is their close attachment to a caring and successful adult, a mentor, a role model, a coach, a youth advocate who supplements what teachers, neighbors and family members provide, particularly when traditional supports are lacking.

When a Congressional committee asked Cornell University's Urie Bronfenbrenner to summarize everything he had learned in a long and

distinguished career in human development research, Bronfenbrenner replied: "Some adult has got to be crazy about the kid, and truly be there for that kid, and let that kid know that his life is important and has meaning."

- \* **Fourth**, STW also builds on powerful recent research finding that most students learn best in context, when they see how knowledge is actually used outside the school, especially in a work setting. Therefore, STW views the employers' workplace as a learning laboratory where young people can experience the *relevance* of knowledge in the "real world." Young people like to work. They blossom in the workplace if they are treated as respected members of a team that is expected to perform responsibly and productively. Generations of inquiry concerning European adolescents undergird these truths. Young people in Europe report pride in their workplace roles. They look forward to the company and the counsel of their adult supervisors and coworkers. And, to a considerable extent, they avoid the epidemic of pathologies which beset so many American youth.
- \* **Fifth**, because STW is outcome- or performance-centered, young people in their dual roles as learners and as workers can demonstrate their proficiency at the highest standards. That accomplishment is then certified by a credential that is recognized and honored by schools, by employers, by parents and by institutions of higher education.

These, then, are five basic premises on which many of the new STW initiatives around the United States are based. To be sure, few existing STW efforts will articulate all of these premises clearly. Nor will these initiatives give equal weight to each

of these premises. Let me assert my firm belief, however, that the most successful and the most enduring STW efforts will be those that incorporate all five of these premises. There simply are no short cuts to excellence.



Now let us see if we can put these premises together in a comprehensive *vision* of a high school learning community based on them. I am indebted to my friend in the U.S. Department of Education, Deputy Assistant Secretary Patricia McNeil, for suggesting how a vision of STW in the context of “systemic school reform” might be portrayed.

### **Anytown High: An Attainable Dream**

Close your eyes for a few moments. Imagine that *you* are an entering freshman at Anytown High School. It is the first day of school. You are seated in the school auditorium with your new classmates. I am the principal, giving you a preview of what kind of school this is, and the kinds of experiences and opportunities available to you.

*“Welcome to Anytown High School! All the adults on the stage with me this morning and around the room—teachers, office staff, counselors, food service and building staff, coaches, community leaders, local employers, labor union representatives, members of our town’s workforce development system, alternative schools, city government, parents and volunteers—we **all** welcome you.*

*Not long ago, I told similar freshmen classes that half of you might not be here to complete your senior year. Today, I want to give you quite a different message. All of us here today pledge that we are here to help each of you get the high level skills and knowledge you will need to become successful citizens, productive workers and lifelong learners. When*

*you complete your experience here or when you finish your secondary schooling at a job training program or community college or alternative school, you will have all you need to enter and complete a two- or four-year college degree program, a registered apprenticeship program, the military, or an entry-level career ladder job. All the adults in this school and in this community are pledged to work together to help you succeed. That is because we accept the wisdom of that old African adage: 'It takes an **entire** village to raise a child.'*

*Everything we do here at Anytown High school is based on three simple and important ideas:*

- 1 What we expect you to learn here is **important** in the world outside these walls, important to your future as citizens, neighbors, parents and workers.*
- 2 We on the teaching staff and in school administration know that **you can learn**. Every single one of you has the ability to master the subject matter in our curriculum. This school is constructed in such a way that it respects your different learning styles. Some of you will need more time and extra help and, here at Anytown High, you will get it. Every one of you can graduate knowing, and being able to do, the things that assure success in the world of work and in life generally.*
- 3 **We won't let you fail**. When I say 'we', I mean the entire community which is mobilized to ensure your success. Together, we will support you and provide many kinds of opportunities for learning, for earning and for fun.*

*Because we in Rhode Island have restructured our entire K-12 school system, most of you have been hearing this message in one way or another from*

*pre-school, through primary and middle school, but it bears repeating today:*

*You are intelligent and capable individuals. No one is born with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in this world. You get smart through **effort**. Our job as adults is to help you develop your skills and knowledge to a high level. You'll be asked to work hard, and we'll be working equally hard alongside you on your behalf.*

*We have a wide range of opportunities for you at Anytown High. In elementary and middle school you participated in a variety of learning experiences; you learned about possible careers; you planned projects and worked in teams to complete them. You will do more of that active learning in new and different ways. We have a broad range of learning options—all designed to give you the skills and knowledge you need to go on to college and into the workplace. Some of you may choose to do most of your learning in a classroom setting; others may choose more interactive work-based learning options. You will work in small academic and career clusters with a team of teachers who, in some cases, will remain with you during your entire time in our school. All of you will engage in hands-on learning where academic and occupational subjects are integrated. All of you will participate in community and public service learning experiences where you will practice the skills and behaviors which employers highly value. We also*

***“...STW views the employers’ workplace as a learning laboratory where young people can experience the relevance of knowledge in the ‘real world.’”***

As you begin to think about choosing a career major, you will learn about many aspects of particular industries, and you will see how knowledge and skills are actually used in those industries and occupations. In these choices, you will be supported by our guidance counselors and by job specialists who will open doors to future employers and show you what you need to be able to do in real workplaces.

Of course, you can change your career clusters in this school. Since you'll all be learning the same core of essential skills and knowledge, you won't be locked into one cluster or one narrow job, either here or after you graduate.

An essential part of your experience in this school is the worksite placements which we offer in your junior and senior years and which in some cases, like Tech Prep, will continue beyond high school. Some of you will choose co-op education and internships with local employers for part of the school year. Some of you, as part of your Tech Prep or youth apprenticeship experience, will be working part-time in industries based on the technologies you will be studying in school. Some of you will be paid for your part-time work with employers after school and in the summers. Some of you will find your work opportunities in hospitals, libraries and other non-profit community services.

**“...certain things do pay off in the labor market: (1) cognitive skills, (2) broad technical skills (especially computer literacy and its applications), (3) postsecondary education and, (4) human relations and workplace skills, like getting along with colleagues and supervisors, working well in teams and demonstrating reliability, responsibility and initiative.”**

*Others of you will choose to enroll in our Career Academies, the small mini-schools on this campus which specialize in careers with good prospects for future professional employment. For example, we have a Financial Services Academy where you can learn about banking, insurance, real estate, investments and tourism. We have an Environmental and Maritime Academy where you can learn about everything connected with earning a living from the sea and how to protect that fragile resource. We have a Health and Bioscience Academy based on modern health care, hospital and laboratory management and exciting new careers in biotechnology. And we have other academies as well. Regardless of which one you choose, you will receive high quality instruction and be able to form close associations with your fellow students and with employers in your career field.*

*Regardless of the kind of worksite placement you have chosen, you will graduate well prepared to continue your studies in higher education or to win an entry-level position with an employer. Above all, you will have experienced the joy of learning and you will excel, no matter how radically the world may change in the future.*

*Even though your elementary and middle school experience was set up so that you would not fall behind, every year presents different challenges. If you are having trouble keeping up or understanding something, we have extra help available in many forms—after-school, on weekends and in the summer. Team sports, clubs, community service and one-on-one help are after-school options from which you can choose.*

*You will wonder how your teachers are so sharp, how they keep up with rapidly changing knowledge. Well, first of all, your teachers see themselves as lifelong learners, constantly striving to know more*

*and to discover more effective ways to help you learn. This school offers many opportunities for professional development on and off this campus. Most important, we build in ample time for your teachers to meet together, to plan your studies, to learn from each other, from your worksite mentors, and from experts around the country, in person and through interactive television, video and satellite sessions.*

*During the summer and at various times in the school year, some of your teachers and counselors will be working alongside you in the plants and offices of our employer partners. They will be learning about the latest changes in technology and management so that your curricula can be kept relevant and so that they understand what you are learning in the worksite. (Incidentally, your teachers will simultaneously be helping to upgrade the basic academic skills of the adult workers you will be working with in your worksite placements.)*

*If you change schools, the skills and knowledge you have demonstrated here will be transferable electronically to your new school. You will also have your portfolio of work and skills/knowledge inventory to take with you. If you want to find another learning experience, we will help you. We work closely with a wide range of alternative schools, with community colleges, with the Job Corps, with youth service and conservation corps, with the new National Civilian Community Corps and others. We*

***“Regardless of the kind of worksite placement you have chosen, you will graduate well prepared to continue your studies in higher education or to win an entry-level position with an employer. Above all, you will have experienced the joy of learning and that will excel, no matter how radically the world may change in the future.”***

*also work closely with the local workforce development system which operates career advancement centers where you can get referrals to further training or qualify for a grant or loan package to help you complete secondary school training on your own.*

*Whenever and wherever you complete your secondary experience, you will receive a high school diploma signifying mastery of a high level of skills and knowledge. That diploma will be accepted by two- and four-year colleges, by employers, by the military and the registered apprenticeship system. Depending on your course of study, you may also receive a certificate of mastery in some advanced level academic or occupational skills. Some of you may take advance placement or other studies in this school that will qualify you to receive college credits. Some of you may graduate in less than four years because you have demonstrated mastery of our core curriculum.*

*While we will do everything to support your learning, there may be personal and family problems that come up in your life so that you need some outside help. As a member of the Anytown Partnership for Families, Anytown High's Human Services Mall hosts a broad array of community agencies that will assist you and your families with non-academic problems. Many of these social services were available to you throughout primary and middle school, so you are familiar with them. You can get information about other services from the computer files in your academic cluster, in the library or the cafeteria. Each of you will also have opportunities to have an adult mentor or coach. It may be an employee at your worksite, a community service volunteer or a parent in the community. Here at Anytown High, we have almost as many community partners as students. Each brings their expertise and their caring into the school and the worksite.*

*Your teachers have worked hard to design the curriculum—in school, at the worksite and in your community service experiences—to support your learning in every way we know. Your guidance counselors and job specialists are working with your teachers and employers in the community to make sure you have access to information about postsecondary schools and careers and that you can use it effectively to plan your further education and careers.*

*The basic message I want to leave with you today is this: you are capable and intelligent young people in transition to adulthood and each adult here is on your side. We are committed to helping you get the skills and knowledge you need to be successful learners, workers and citizens. You can do it; we are here to help; and you can count on us. Welcome to Anytown High!”*

Our opening day assembly is now over. Those of you who haven't been put to sleep by the principal's long oration may open your eyes ...

It's true, of course, that most of the students in the auditorium probably did not absorb the full promise of what awaits them at Anytown High. Yet, I think, few of them will fail to grasp the central message: That they are important and that they are going to be successful in life.

All of the *adults* in the community, too, should now clearly understand that this description of a radically different kind of learning community requires their fullest participation. Education at Anytown High is a serious full-time partnership

***“...there is not one element in my dream that is not a living reality someplace in this country. Everything in this dream is being practiced somewhere... now, today.”***

of the entire community. Its objective is simple and straightforward: success in work, success in life for each and every young person who enters our schools.

Undoubtedly, some of you are thinking: “What a nice Utopian dream. Halperin is just a dreamer.” Yes, I do have a dream! However, there is not one element in my dream that is not a *living reality someplace* in this country. *Everything* in this dream is being practiced somewhere ... now, today. All that Patricia McNeil and I have done is put it all together to meet our personal vision. I hope you will do the same with your own ideas about education, youth development and the world of work.

So, I end where I began. The challenge before the people of Rhode Island is to dream your own dream for the State and for your own communities. Rethink the essential nature of schooling at the dawn of the 21st Century. Construct a total quality *system* in which all the parts of your dream come together to produce success for all of Rhode Island’s young people.

# SAMUEL HALPERIN, Ph.D.

## Biographical Sketch

Samuel Halperin has held a variety of leadership positions in academia, the federal government and non-profit organizations since earning his doctorate in Political Science from Washington University, St. Louis in 1956.

The **American Youth Policy Forum**, which Dr. Halperin directs, is a professional development program for federal policy aides that provides information and experiences helpful to the development of an effective youth development, education and employment training system for the United States.

As Study Director from 1986-1992 of **Youth and America's Future: The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship**, he was responsible for development of the Commission's major studies: *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America* and *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families* (1988), as well as three dozen additional research reports and monographs on youth development and the school-to-employment transition. Recent publications which he initiated or edited include: *Voices From The Field: 30 Expert Opinions on America 2000*; *States and Communities On the Move: Policy Initiatives to Create a World-Class Workforce*; *Youth Apprenticeship in America: Guidelines for Building an Effective System*; *Making Sense of Federal Job Training Policy: 24 Expert Recommendations to Create "A Comprehensive and Unified Federal Job Training System"*; *Visions of Service: The Future of the National and Community Service Act*; *Improving the Transition from School to Work in the United States*; *Opening Career Paths for Youth: What Can Be Done? Who Can Do It?*

Earlier, as a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association, he worked on U.S. Senate and House of Representatives committees dealing with major education legislation (1960-61). As Director of the U.S. Office of Education's Office of Congressional Relations and Assistant U.S. Commissioner of Education for Legislation, he participated in the development and passage of such significant measures as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Higher Education Acts of 1963 and 1965, and many others. In 1966, Dr. Halperin joined the Office of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare where, as Deputy Assistant Secretary under Secretaries John W. Gardner and Wilbur J. Cohen, he continued work as an "executive branch lobbyist" for passage of scores of Great Society measures in education and the social services. For these efforts, he was twice awarded HEW's Superior Service Award, HEW's Distinguished Service Award, and the National Association of State Boards of Education Distinguished Service Award.

From 1969 to 1981, Dr. Halperin headed leadership training programs at The George Washington University, including the nationwide Institute for Educational Leadership, of which he was the director and first president.

Dr. Halperin is the author, co-author or editor of a dozen books on the political process and on educational policy issues, as well as over 90 articles. He has taught at Wayne State, American, and Duke Universities and Teachers College - Columbia University, and lectured at many others. He has also served on numerous boards and advisory bodies, including those for the Peace Corps, Secretary of the Navy's Advisory Board on Education and Training, National School Volunteer Program, Jobs for the Future and the Private Industry Council of the District of Columbia. He is Founder and Secretary of

the D.C. Service Corps, and works with numerous youth development organizations, including Youth Service America, YouthBuild USA, National Youth Employment Coalition, Opportunity Skyway, Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. In 1990, he received the Distinguished Service Award of the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps and, in 1994, the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award of Jobs for the Future and the President's Medal of The George Washington University. Currently, he serves on the District of Columbia Commission on National and Community Service.

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