



Putting It All Together for a Better Future

PERSISTENTLY LOW HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES ARE A PROBLEM FACING COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE NATION, WITH NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. ONE INNOVATIVE BUSINESS-EDUCATOR PARTNERSHIP IS SEEKING TO REVERSE THE TREND FOR THE COMMUNITY.

Carroll County, a small community nestled in West Georgia, often refers to itself as a “community in transition.” The moniker is a perfect description for the growing community, which is benefiting from its combination of rural charm and proximity to the city centers of Atlanta, Ga., and Birmingham, Al. But like many other communities—both rural and urban—Carroll County is grappling with persistently low high school graduation rates and a workforce that has to adapt to the challenges of today’s dynamic, knowledge-driven economy. Carroll County is not alone in this challenge. Nationally, an increasing share of employers report that, in addition to lacking hard skills like math and science, the current and incoming workforce is also deficient in important soft skills such as positive work ethics, teamwork, and communication.¹

Homegrown Business Tackles Homegrown Challenges

The effects of high dropout rates ripple far beyond the individual students who fail to graduate. According to a 2009 study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, high school dropouts face lower earning power and fewer job opportunities than their peers with high school diplomas—but their lack of education also affects local labor markets and the economic vitality of the surrounding community.² Educational attainment of the local workforce is a primary concern for companies considering locations for new or expanded

facilities, making cities and towns with low graduation rates less attractive to these potential new employers. Economic developers in Carroll County, led by Carroll Tomorrow (a sister organization to the Carroll County Chamber of Commerce that is responsible for economic development), were also focused on retaining existing businesses. Many studies have shown that as much as 80 percent of new jobs in a community are tied to the community’s existing businesses,³ and an educated and reliable local workforce is often just as vital to existing businesses as to new ones.

Southwire Company, a family-owned manufacturer of wire and cable founded and headquartered in Carroll County, is one of the area’s largest employers and has been deeply involved in the community since its 1950 inception. As the company’s technological sophistication and geographic reach grew, so too did the education requirements for its workforce. Southwire executives two decades ago understood that the company needed access to an educated and well-prepared workforce in order to continue expanding operations, so they implemented a hiring policy requiring applicants to have at least a high school diploma or GED. Initially, the decision “cut our applicant pool by a huge percent,” said Mike Wiggins, Southwire’s executive vice president of human resources. As he explained, people didn’t understand at first why they needed a high school degree to run machines. But Southwire executives soon began to notice a shift in local perceptions about high school education.



In more recent years, however, the county's high school graduation rate began to fall. Concerned about the flagging graduation rate and dedicated to its home base, Southwire approached other interested local stakeholders—educators, economic developers, and community leaders—about partnering to address the issue. “If we didn’t step up, how would we ever convince people of the value of an education?” explained Wiggins.

The result was 12 for Life, an innovative partnership between Southwire and the Carroll County School System, launched in 2007. The program’s name reflects its core mission: to help students at risk of dropping out realize the difference a full 12 years of education can make in their lives. Additionally, the program targets a host of other issues—including financial literacy and basic life skills—to help the students become long-term, valuable contributors to their families and community.

The Engine of Community and Economic Development: 12 for Life

The engine that drives 12 for Life is the dedicated partnership between Southwire and the Carroll County School System. The program is aimed at reducing high school dropout rates and helping students prepare for the next stage in their lives, whether it is continuing their educa-

tion or entering the workforce. It’s no accident that the program also seeks to strengthen the local tax base and attract or retain businesses by strengthening the caliber of the local workforce. “We want to do something about the graduation rate, we want to do something about people who pay taxes, and we want to give kids a shot at being responsible, productive citizens. And we want to do it in a way that is sustainable,” explained Wiggins.

Targeting students before they drop out of high school, rather than creating workforce development programs aimed at adults without a diploma or at those who want to retrain for another career, is a critical distinguishing feature of the 12 for Life program. Another is its inclusive strategy, which aligns the education, workforce development, and economic development goals of the community. According to a 2010 report by the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), strategies that successfully integrate education and workforce development are essential for today’s economic development environment.⁴

The IEDC report also notes that economic developers who must focus on creating high quality jobs in knowledge-driven, high-skill industries are often faced with a population lacking entry-level qualifications. Further challenging economic developers is the shift in the practice of economic development from a focus on specific transactions,



“The graduation rate within the program has also been a success, with 97 percent of the participating students earning their diploma.”

measured by the number of jobs per project, to one on system-building and nurturing an entire economic engine to sustain industries that create a wide variety of jobs and opportunities for advancement.⁵

12 for Life Structure and Goals

The 12 for Life program combines a traditional classroom education with a job at a Southwire plant. Through this structure, at-risk students earn academic credits toward graduation while also earning a paycheck, learning critical job and life skills, and benefiting from mentoring relationships with Southwire employees. Students attend classes at their regular high school for a portion of the day and then work at least 20 hours per week at a Southwire plant that was designed especially for them. This special 12 for Life plant houses several workstations where student workers repackage wire, assemble spools and reels, and perform support functions such as data entry, shipping, and quality assurance. Students can also

earn monetary bonuses for positive behaviors such as punctuality and meeting assigned production goals.

The likelihood of completing high school because of the ability to earn academic credits and a paycheck simultaneously is an important benefit of the program, especially in a school system where economically disadvantaged students made up nearly half of the class in 2009. According to a 2007 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—the primary federal entity responsible for collecting and analyzing education data—students from low-income families are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers from high-income families.⁶

12 for Life participants regularly attend classes on work and life skills covering key topics such as attendance, teamwork, attitude, and organizational skills. These same issues are addressed as students encounter them on the job, noted 12 for Life coordinator Doug Wright. The program also aims to increase students’ financial literacy through seminars on money management, which teach

“It’s a workforce development issue, it’s a quality-of-life issue, and it’s a community improvement issue.”

students about budgeting, banking and credit, insurance, and taxes. Parents and guardians that are actively involved in the program with their children also have an opportunity to learn these important life skills in a series of parent nights that are held on a quarterly basis.

The program’s efforts to instill a positive work ethic and teach important soft skills, such as teamwork and communication, are especially important in today’s labor market. In a 2006 survey of more than 400 U.S. employers conducted by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, more than 70 percent of respondents reported recent high school graduates as being “deficient” in professionalism and work ethic.⁷ Employers rank these same skills, according to the report, as being among the most important for success in today’s workplace. The problem is also being studied on a regional level. A 2007 report by Georgia Tech’s Enterprise Innovation Institute and the University of Georgia’s Fanning Institute found that the current, emerging, and future workforce was viewed as needing development in hard skills, soft skills, and life skills.⁸

Taking It to the Next Level: Evaluation and Replication

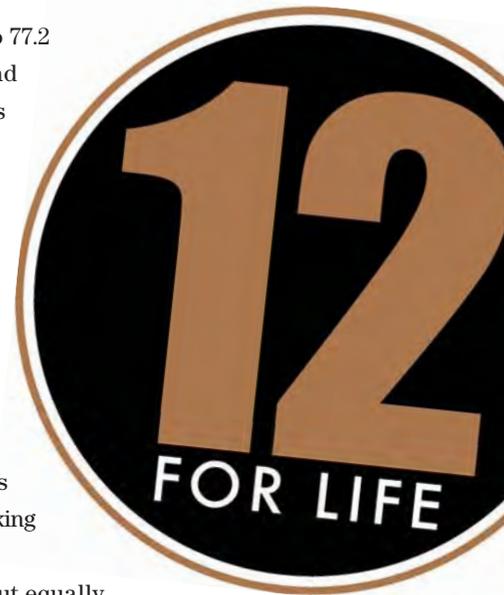
At the end of the 2009–10 school year, 12 for Life had guided a total of 171 students to high school graduation, well within reach of Southwire’s goal of 175 graduates by 2012. The graduation rate within the program has also been a success, with 97 percent of the participating students earning their diploma. Thirty-six students have been hired since the program began, and 33 interns, all graduates of the 12 for Life program, are currently employed by Southwire at the 12 for Life facility.

From a wider perspective, the program is also helping to boost the county’s graduation rate, which increased



11 percentage points to 77.2 percent between 2004 and 2009. Program officials take some credit for the improvement, although they are quick to point out other factors that are also helping. “The schools are doing incredible work, too,” said Wright. “Hopefully, some of the impact is from what we’re doing as well. It’s everybody working together,” he added.

Harder to quantify but equally important is the program’s role in helping at-risk students see a better future for themselves. The students reported that the program has had a dramatic influence on their lives, using words like “life-changing.”⁹ Mentors in the program were surprised to learn the scope of the high school dropout crisis and admitted they didn’t know that one of the reasons students drop out of high school was to help support their families financially. On a more practical level, the 12 for Life



plant in Carroll County is a fully operational and productive plant. Stu Thorn, the company's president and chief executive officer, said the company has profited financially from the program and benefited from improved employee retention and morale.

Southwire has tried to show that the model can be replicated on a smaller scale by starting a simplified version of the program in Florence, Ala., where the company also maintains a manufacturing facility. "We would like nothing better than for this thing to multiply," said Southwire's Wiggins. 12 For Life Florence, which began in June 2009 and covers just one school in the area, is about a third of the size of the original program. Other efforts at replication seem to be gaining momentum; Georgia's Monroe County Schools and the Georgia Department of Corrections are the first partners to replicate the 12 for Life program in a nonmanufacturing, nonSouthwire facility. Using the 12 for Life trademark, Monroe Schools and the Department of Corrections have started with five high school students and are planning to grow enrollment to 40 students working in business-related occupations. To support expansion of the model, Southwire has offered to counsel other businesses through the process. "We'll give you our guides, our best practices, and our lessons learned," said Wiggins.

The promising successes of 12 for Life do not mean there haven't been challenges. A two-year study of the program conducted by the Evaluation Center at the University of West Georgia found that Southwire had to adjust its operations to those of the school system, while Carroll County Schools in turn had to adapt to working with a fast-paced private corporation. Mike Wiggins reported that attendance remains a thorny challenge, and a few students were removed from the program for violating the zero-tolerance drug policy. But these students make up a small portion of the 171 students that have made their way through the program so far.

The employee mentors reported feeling unprepared to counsel the students on the serious life issues they were experiencing, and also reported difficulty transitioning their relationships with the students when they graduated from the program. This led the Evaluation Center to suggest training on handling life issues and closure protocol to aid mentors. Another ongoing challenge has been helping those 12 for Life graduates who become employees at Southwire transition to full-time work.

Finally, while the report indicates that all aspects of the program are replicable, many of the would-be partners hesitate when they realize the depth of the resource and time commitment that success requires, explained Scott Cowart, superintendent of Carroll County Schools. The program is about "more than giving a donation, having your name on a [sign] as a partner to the school system, or sending a few mentors over to help," he added.

Conclusion

As word of the program's success travels, both Southwire and Carroll County schools continue to express a desire to see it grow. "It's a workforce development issue, it's a quality-of-life issue, and it's a community improvement issue," said Cowart. "You can say it's about improving graduation rates—and it is—but it's much more than that." Daniel Jackson, president and CEO of the Carroll County Chamber of Commerce noted that communities "have to be willing and able to bring the business and economic development community, civic and other community leaders, and educators together... asking what can all of us do, working in concert, to ... build the workforce of the future that we need, and [12 for Life] just happens to be one really good example of that." ■

This article was written by Lela Somoza, a staff writer for the Atlanta Fed.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, *Are They Really Ready to Work?—Employer's Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*, 2006, p21.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf.
- ² Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, *Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis*, May 2009, clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/CLMS_2009_Dropout_Report.pdf.
- ³ David S. Kraybill, "Retention and Expansion First," *Ohio's Challenge* (Columbus, OH: Department of Agricultural Economics, Ohio State University), 8 (2), 1995, msucares.com/crd/business/bre_brochure.pdf.
- ⁴ International Economic Development Council, *Creating Quality Jobs: Transforming the Economic Development Landscape*, March 2010, iedconline.org/Downloads/IEDC_Quality_Jobs.pdf.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, *High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2007*, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsw2009/2009064.pdf>.
- ⁷ *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, 2006, p. 13.
- ⁸ Georgia Tech's Innovation Institute and the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute, *Building the Next Workforce—Georgia Discussion Forums: Consolidated Results*, June 2007, southerngrowth.com/forums/reports/ga_report07.pdf.
- ⁹ University of West Georgia College of Education, The Evaluation Center, *12 for Life Program Evaluation*, December 2009.