

work ready

By Debra Lyons, George M. Israel, III, Kerry Campbell, and Fred McConnel

INTRODUCTION

Georgia Governor Perdue has developed a successful formula to link workforce development and education together in an economic development strategy that will quickly enable a "Ready for Business" to be put across all of Georgia.

Work Ready Formula: $(P) * (W + D) * A = CWRC$

Where: P is the public-private partnerships

W is the number of adults attaining a Work Ready Certificate

D is the number of additional students earning high school diplomas

A is the accessibility

$CWRC$ is the number of counties becoming Certified Work Ready Communities

Through his Office of Workforce Development, the governor is implementing this transformational state policy, which Georgia counties are quickly adopting. To date, 73 out of Georgia's 159 counties have signed up to complete the requirements to become Certified Work Ready Communities (Figure 1). While many states are utilizing a state work or career readiness credential to help validate their workforce, only Georgia has developed a formula for success that links workforce development and education together through a partnership where every stakeholder has a well defined role. The policy is simple, transparent, uniform, consistent, and easy to communicate and implement. The policy's success is defined by the number of counties that become Certified Work Ready Communities.



Debra Lyons, Gov. Perdue, Jonathan Collard (Director of Communications – Covidien, Washington, D.C.), Howard Jones (Production Superintendent), and William Joachim (Plant Manager) tour the Covidien plant in Bibb County prior to the governor presenting a plaque honoring the facility as Georgia's first Work Ready plant.

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Acknowledgement
We would like to thank Trey Childress, Heidi Green, and Jennifer Rippner for their contributions in developing the policy framework for the Work Ready initiative.

A FORMULA TO DEVELOP GEORGIA'S 21ST CENTURY WORKFORCE

Georgia's Governor Perdue has developed a successful formula that links workforce development and education together through a county Work Ready Community team. This local partnership focuses on the available and existing workforce earning a set number of Work Ready Certificates and the county increasing its public high school graduation rate by a specified bench mark. The policy is simple, transparent, consistent and easy to communicate and implement. This effort is amplified through state and local public-private partnerships. The technical college system of Georgia provides easy delivery of Work Ready assessments with overall statewide direction provided by the Governor's Office of Workforce Development. The outcome is a community that knows how to work together to deliver irrefutable results.

FIGURE 1:

Georgia map that shows counties that are participating in Work Ready communities.



Certified Work Ready Community data are being collected and reported in the aggregate for each county. Monthly reports are posted and accessible to county team members to encourage friendly competition. The outcome is a community that knows how to work together to deliver the results to ensure economic growth in a globally competitive market.

This article presents the holistic approach of how the strategy was developed and initiated from the Governor's Commission for a New Georgia's Workforce Development Task Force to the development and successful implementation of Work Ready to the results obtained to the overall transformation of workforce development policy in the state of

Georgia. The article provides a roadmap for readers to successfully implement Work Ready in their communities within and outside of the United States.

BACKGROUND

In 2002, Sonny Perdue was elected with a pro-business agenda for a New Georgia. Early in his administration, he created the Commission for a New Georgia (CNG), a think tank consisting of top-level executives who would provide business driven recommendations to transform Georgia state government.

One of the Commission's first issues was how to improve Georgia's workforce. While the state is well-known for its excellent customized training programs through Quickstart, business and industry had expressed problems with hiring workers with the skill levels needed to help Georgia's industries remain competitive in the 21st century economy. The CNG Workforce Development Task Force, headed by Ann Cramer, director of corporate community relations, IBM, found Georgia has excellent workforce development resources. However, the failure to connect these resources end to end was limiting the state's ability to transform and sustain a competitive workforce at a skill level needed for the jobs being created today and tomorrow. Below are some of the task force's recommendations (Commission for New Georgia, Workforce Development Task Force Recommendations, www.newgeorgia.org).

- Establish an entity accountable for the success of Georgia's workforce development efforts.
- Create a solution that identifies and eliminates Georgia's skills gap.
- Move Georgia's high school graduation rate above the national average.
- Create a linkage among economic development, education, and employer communities.
- Implement an effective workforce development communication strategy.

Governor Perdue acted on these recommendations by reconstituting the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB), creating the Governor's Office of Workforce Development (GOWD), tapping the Workforce Investment Act governor's statewide discretionary account to provide seed funding, and hiring a workforce development director to guide the process of implementing the task force's recommendations. The governor set forth a Workforce Development Vision for Georgia: to link education and workforce development together and align with the economic development of the state, its regions, and communities.

He swore in the new SWIB in February 2006 and asked it to develop a strategic plan that would implement his vision. At the same time, he asked his workforce development director to develop a plan to implement the recommendations.

Eliminating the skills gap was determined to be the key driver in transforming Georgia's workforce. Working as a team, the governor's workforce development director and his policy advisors met repeatedly to develop a plan that would drive change in Georgia, using a skills assessment system for workers and employers to determine skills possessed by Georgia's workforce, skills needed by Georgia's businesses, and a process to evaluate and eliminate the skills gap. To ensure a good connection with industry, the governor asked the Georgia Chamber of Commerce to be a partner with the state on the initiative. And, he decided on the name that simply communicated the strategy: Work Ready.

DRIVING CHANGE: DEVELOPING WORK READY

Through a competitive process, the GOWD selected ACT WorkKeys® as the skills assessment and job profiling vendor for Work Ready. With the tool selected to determine the skills gap, the next logical step was to develop a business plan that would motivate Georgians and employers to utilize this tool. The policy team wanted to keep it simple

and to utilize this tool as a fundamental building block, enabling the governor's vision to become a reality. The key was to find the change agent.

The governor's vision statement made it clear that he wanted to link education and workforce development together and align at a state and local level. In Georgia, the county is the fundamental building block and so it became the key variable in developing the formula that would incentivize local economic development.

County economic developers are responsible for helping their existing industries remain competitive while working to attract new industry. Economic developers would have a marketing tool with the ability to document the skill level of their workforce. Thus, the concept of Certified Work Ready Communities was developed.

The plan features a Work Ready Certificate for every adult Georgian at no cost and Work Ready profiles for all jobs that meet minimum hiring criteria. It incentivizes counties to become certified through a competitive process where a certain number of county residents earn Work Ready Certificates.

But that was only a part of the governor's vision. The next logical step was how to link education to workforce development. Thus, a second criterion was established – requiring all counties to demonstrate their commitment to increasing the high

TABLE 1:
Certified Work Ready Communities high school graduation rate increase policy

Certified Work Ready Community (CWRC) Public High School Graduation Rate Increase Guidelines			
County Public High School Graduation Class Size	Baseline Public HS Graduation Rate* At or Below 68%	Baseline Public HS Graduation Rate* Between 68% and 79%	Baseline Public HS Graduation Rate* Above 79%
Below 200 Students	9% total increase over a 3 year period (average 3%/yr)	4% total increase over a 3 year period (average 1.33%/yr)	2% total increase over a 3 year period (average .67%/yr)
Between 200 and 700 Students	6% total increase over a 3 year period (average 2%/yr)	3% total increase over a 3 year period (average 1%/yr)	1.5% total increase over a 3 year period (average .5%/yr)
Above 700 Students	3% total increase over a 3 year period (average 1%/yr)	2% total increase over a 3 year period (average .67%/yr)	1% total increase over a 3 year period (average .33%/yr)

* Baseline Graduation Rate Year for CWRC Requirements is the 2005-2006 School Year

Notes:

- For those counties that meet the improvement requirements but continue to have a county High School Graduation Rate (HSGR) below 70%, the county will attain **CWRC – In Progress**. County attains full status of **CWRC** when county HSGR reaches minimum threshold of 70%. The county must continue to demonstrate they are improving their public HSGR to keep **CWRC** status.
- For those counties (Baker County, Chattahoochee County, Clay County, Quitman County, and Webster County) that do not have a 2006 graduation rate, the county must describe how they will align with partner counties to achieve CWRC requirements.
- Governor's Office of Student Achievement will determine when county has demonstrated it has met its commitment to increasing their public HSGR.

school graduation rate (Table 1). After reviewing the plan, Governor Perdue especially wanted to be sure that the levels established were substantive and yet attainable. And so, the criteria for Certified Work Ready Communities were established at a threshold of three percent of the existing workforce, both public and private, and 25 percent of the available workforce (high school graduates, technical college students, GED students, and the unemployed) earn Work Ready Certificates.

The additional policy of step increases in county high school graduation rates was established based on population and current high school graduation rates. More importantly, even though high school graduation steps were based on percentages, those



Celebration of Georgia's first Certified Work Ready Plant on February 15, 2008.

percentages were turned into reality by providing what that percentage rate meant in terms of 'how many more students need to graduate per year.'

There was a discussion about establishing a minimum threshold of a 70 percent graduation rate to attain the designation; however, it was determined that establishing that benchmark could be a disincentive for some rural counties. And, rural counties were the ones that most needed to increase their graduation rates. Therefore, it was felt that counties could attain the CWRC status by reaching the step increase, but would need to continue to increase their HSGR to keep the designation. In addition, the 70 percent threshold became the dividing point for a county to become a CWRC of Excellence.

The last piece of the policy was establishing the timeframe. The Work Ready policy team determined that counties would have 36 months to complete the process of attaining their Work Ready Certificates and high school graduation goals.

IMPLEMENTING CERTIFIED WORK READY COMMUNITIES

The next step was how to provide a consistent framework across each county to enable a support system to be established. The GOWD looked at which partners needed to be at the table for each county. By assessing what results were to be attained and how the work load could be distributed, the GOWD determined that the following partners were needed: county commission chair, mayor, technical college, local workforce investment board, GDOL career centers, local board of education, regional economic development, regional department of community affairs, local chambers, and business and industry. Each county, though, selected its own team leader. That seemed to be a novel concept as most counties want the GOWD to determine who should be the Work Ready team leader. However, it was felt that natural leaders emerge and it is best left to local communities to select that leader.

The requirements for each county for Work Ready Certificates to be earned per demographic group and

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the step increase in high school graduation rate were calculated and posted on the Work Ready website. The initiative included a competitive grant process for smaller counties that would be willing to complete the process in 18 months. The open enrollment period for counties was 90 days.

The GOWD then presented CWRC at a series of 12 Workforce Development Community forums jointly held with the State Workforce Investment Board, the 12 local Workforce Investment Boards, the Georgia Department of Labor, Fanning Institute of the University of Georgia, and the Economic Innovation Institute of Georgia Institute of Technology as a possible solution to local workforce development problems.



The Governor's Office of Workforce Development presents the first Road to Readiness award to the Upson County Team. (l-r) Kathy Love, President, Flint River Technical College; Gail Daniels, Upson-Lee High School Graduation Coach; Kris Thomas, Upson County Team Leader, Quad Graphics Education Manager; Robin Folsom, Work Ready Coordinator; and Fred McConnel, Work Ready Community Leader.

At the same time that the policy and implementation plans were being developed, a communications and public outreach plan was being assembled. All key stakeholders were identified with a special focus on connecting to the team leaders, local technical colleges, and local chambers of commerce. Tools were developed to specifically address the needs of each group. The first tool launched was the Work Ready website (www.gaworkready.org) which provided easy to find information on where Work Ready assessments are offered. Processes were established to ensure timely delivery of Work Ready Certificates and posting of monthly county results.

A statewide Certified Work Ready Community leader was hired to help build support among the counties to participate. An initial goal was established to have 15 counties participate by the end of the first 90-day sign up period. And, a process was put in place to begin to mentor the participating counties to be successful. That process included accountability, a support plan, and developing strong bonds with the team leaders and high school graduation and community coaches. The High School Graduation Coaches program provides a resource person at every high school trained to identify at-risk youth and develop plans to keep them on track to graduate on time. The Community Coaches program encourages local business leaders to volunteer to assist high school graduation coaches.

SERVICE DELIVERY OF WORK READY

Georgia is fortunate to have a well connected system of excellent technical colleges that is centrally organized and whose collective mission is only workforce development. When called upon by the governor to be the service delivery providers, the colleges quickly responded and implemented a plan to deliver Work Ready assessments on each of their campuses.

The GOWD streamlined the process so every Georgian can take a Work Ready assessment at any technical college throughout the state at no cost. If they reach a minimum level, a certificate is directly mailed to them. If participants desire to improve their score, several options of gap training are available to them through the technical colleges.

Georgians may either remediate via self-guided on-line tutorials or they may access personalized assistance at any one of Georgia's adult education centers at no cost. If participants desire an instructor led course, it is available at a minimum cost. Georgians may access information on location of Work Ready assessments by county at www.gaworkready.org.

PARTNERSHIP WITH GEORGIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The partnership between Georgia and the Georgia Chamber of Commerce is one of the key variables in Georgia's Work Ready success formula. It is cemented through the signature of both the governor and the president of the Georgia Chamber on the certificate. The Chamber has helped promote Work Ready through its network of local chamber and industry members. It has also worked with the GOWD and its public outreach vendor in ensuring the tools being developed contained the right message and tone to move both businesses and chambers to action.

PARTNERSHIP WITH GEORGIA POWER

Change through Work Ready requires the business community utilizing the certificate and job profile tools to make better hiring decisions. During the 12 forums where Work Ready was introduced, a common recommendation received from attendees was to find a key business to endorse the program.

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Georgia Power has been working closely with the governor's office in providing support to help increase the state's high school graduation rate. It worked with the governor to help build a network of more than 350 volunteers to serve as community coaches. These individuals provide a business link to education by providing support to the high school graduation coaches.

Georgia Power is facing a baby boomer retirement situation that will require the company to replace 70 percent of its entry-level lineman jobs over the next 10 years. And, it is having significant problems finding entry-level candidates that could meet their entry level qualifications. Georgia Power is not alone. Many of the other energy companies in the Southeast are facing the same hiring crisis. The company began working with the GOWD earlier this year to build an Energy Council to explore how best to solve this problem.



Job seekers taking Work Ready assessments at one of Georgia's 35 technical colleges' Work Ready Centers.

Because of the company's work in helping to increase high school graduation rates, its desire to find a better pool of candidates to fill vacancies and its name recognition, it seemed like the perfect company to bring on board to endorse Work Ready. Mike Garrett, CEO of Georgia Power and a member of the State Workforce Investment Board, quickly answered the governor's call to serve as the 'business champion' for Work Ready. In this role, Garrett states, "Workforce readiness is critical not just to the electric utility industry, but to the economic well-being of Georgia and of the entire United States. Georgia's Work Ready is a great tool to help local communities validate they have the workers ready to fill the hiring needs for both existing and new industries. To keep Georgia moving ahead, the business sector must get involved in education and workforce issues. Improvement can come through focused initiatives and strong, effective partnerships between business and government."

WORK READY IS WORKING!

The plan worked. Within 90 days, 73 of Georgia's 159 counties signed up to begin the process of becoming Certified Work Ready Communities. And 23 had applied to become an Accelerated Certified Work Ready Community. What led to such a tremendous response?

- **Transparency** – By putting the CWRC criteria on the internet, each county knew exactly what its goals are and also every other county's goals.
- **Simplicity** – Work Ready Certificates can be utilized by every Georgian to demonstrate foundation work readiness skills for any job.
- **Economic Development** – On one sheet of paper, each county can demonstrate the work readiness level of its available workforce.
- **Communication** – Strong public outreach plan that consists of delivery of information via the website, tool kits for all partners, and direct marketing to all Georgians and Georgia businesses.
- **Competition** – Making results available monthly via the internet for each county.
- **Support** – GOWD provides forums for monthly meetings of all county team leaders and holds each accountable for results.
- **Delivery system** – Providing a uniform delivery of Work Ready Certificates and job profiling through Georgia's technical college system enables all Georgians and Georgia businesses to easily access Work Ready.

The policy and implementation of Governor Perdue's Certified Work Ready Communities is a formula for success. Results attained in the first 10 months (February through November 2007) are:

- 73 CWRC in-progress participating counties; another 25 have indicated their desire to participate in the next sign up period that began January 2008.
- Over 4100 Work Ready Certificates earned in that timeframe (Figure 2); over 5500 in the last three months; over 3100 in the last month.
- 45 of the 73 counties are on track to reach their high school graduation increase rate goals; 13 have already attained their high school graduation rate increase goals.
- 35 Work Ready job profiles conducted over the last six months and many more in the pipeline; over 270 active Georgia Work Ready job profiles on file.
- Over 70 people from 52 businesses and agencies attended the first Making Work Ready Work for your community forum; 70 percent indicated a strong desire to utilize Work Ready.

Some Georgia businesses utilizing Work Ready to make better hiring decisions are Covidien, Power Partners, Temple-Inland, Tara Foods, Callaway Gardens, and Propex Fabrics.

SUCCESS STORIES

Bartow County

The county is one of the Accelerated Certified Work Ready Communities in-progress and has successfully promoted the Work Ready Initiative using local radio, newspaper, and the participation of county leaders. On top of having its local high schools commit to having all of its seniors assessed, Bartow County has had an amazing boost from local community leaders. In the fall, Bartow County elected a new mayor. One of the first things Mayor-elect Matt Santini did for his community was issue a challenge. Now, Mayor Santini took the Work Ready assessment and scored in the top tier of the gold level.

He then issued a challenge to the rest of the community and local community leaders to try to beat his score. The prize for one-upping him was free massages donated by a local business. The challenge was publicized in the local paper and radio. On a cold December morning, 20 local community leaders sat for the assessment in the Bartow-Cartersville Chamber of Commerce. Of the 20, only two were able to beat the entire mayor-elect's scores. This was good news for the mayor, proving that maybe he was the right man for the job and also the local businesses didn't have to go into debt fulfilling the challenge!

This effort really demonstrates the commitment of the Bartow County leaders to Work Ready. They believe the certificate is a viable and useful tool to help residents identify and improve their job skills, making them a better potential or current employee.

Figure 2:
Work Ready certificates earned June through November 2007



Bibb County

In Bibb County, Covidien, a manufacturing facility whose product line includes diapers and other similar healthcare products, has been using ACT WorkKeys® to make hiring decisions for its production and warehouse workforce. When the governor rolled out Work Ready, which utilizes ACT WorkKeys® as the skills assessment tool, the company immediately came on board to endorse the program. The company's return-on-investment data shows how Work Ready is reducing its hiring and training budget (67 percent reduction in cost to hire and over 200 percent improvement in training), increasing its productivity (by 30 percent), and reducing waste (by 6 percent).

When the company saw that the counties where they draw their workforce from were participating

in the Certified Work Ready Community initiative, it decided to help these counties achieve their goal by requiring all of their hourly employees to take a Work Ready assessment. Within a two-month period, they had completed this goal and 379 of their employees have earned Work Ready Certificates. This effort has led to improved morale and greater productivity. And, Covidien has become Georgia's first Work Ready plant proclaimed by the governor during a plant visit to commend their support of Work Ready.



Covidien Plant HR Team with Work Ready plaque from the governor.

Work Ready is a successful transformational strategy for Georgia. Through its assessments, certificates, job profiles, communities and newest element, regions, Georgia is positioning its workforce as the state's number one competitive advantage. The key Work Ready driver is its Certified Work Ready Communities element.

Hart County

Hart has made the Work Ready effort a seamless transition period all the way from kindergarten to college and then the work place. Hart is looking beyond the remainder of its Work Ready period on to the future of the county with Work Ready at the center of its progress initiative.

All the school systems are informed on Work Ready and their students know that to get a job they will need to take the assessment. Current seniors who are assessed are then taken on tours of local

companies that have come to recognize the Work Ready Certificate. This has created a direct link between the high schools and the local businesses, driving them all towards the same goals using the same tool. Hart is also using local football players as motivational speakers and using the large retirement community to tutor and mentor at-risk students.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Work Ready is a successful transformational strategy for Georgia. Through its assessments, certificates, job profiles, communities and newest element, regions, Georgia is positioning its workforce as the state's number one competitive advantage. The key Work Ready driver is its Certified Work Ready Communities element. In a ten-month time-frame from the initial announcement of a new statewide workforce development initiative, results are already taking hold. The synergy being created by the friendly competition and county common cause has led to results and to better leveraging of workforce development resources. The state and companies are seeing significant returns on investment. *Work Ready – it Works and it can Work for your communities, regions, and state too!* 



AUGUST 7-8

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As economic developers work to improve the communities in which they work, real estate development and reuse often comes forward as a popular economic development tool. While most real estate development projects occur entirely within the realm of the private sector, the public sector becomes involved in real estate projects as it works to create jobs, improve the tax base or encourage development in a particular area.

It is important then that economic developers have a solid understanding of the real estate development process. Participants will learn about the various tools that are available at the local level, including tax increment financing, bonds, land assembly and eminent domain, in addition to the many federal programs available.

COURSE HIGHLIGHTS:

- Overview of the land development process
- Market, site and financial analysis
- The roles of private, public and non-profit sectors
- Considerations when providing gap financing
- Local and Federal tools and resources
- An overview of brownfields redevelopment
- Issuing a request for proposal (RFP) or request for qualifications (RFQ)

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