

Achieving Economic Development Through Workforce Development

By Penelope Schmidt

THE PROGRESS OF FOUR SOUTH GEORGIA COUNTIES IN THE GEORGIA WORK READY PROGRAM

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achieving economic DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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THE GEORGIA WORK READY PROGRAM

the lack of a qualified workforce limits opportunities for economic prosperity for businesses and individuals and negatively impacts our country on a national, state, and local level. The Georgia Work Ready Program was developed as a tool to promote both workforce development and economic development and thereby allow Georgians to better compete in the global marketplace (Communities 2009).

According to Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue, "We need a workforce development system that links workforce development and education together and to the economic needs of the state, its regions and local communities" (Governor's Office of Workforce Development 2009). In collaboration with the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, Governor Perdue developed the Georgia Work Ready Program as an interlinked workforce development system designed to promote workforce skills development and economic development (What is Georgia Work Ready? 2009).

The Georgia Work Ready Program is unique in that it provides opportunities to assess the skills of the workforce and provides needed training at no charge, develops career pathways to support an area's strategic industries, and provides tools to help businesses succeed. All of this is accomplished through collaborative partnerships among businesses, educators, chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, government, and community organizations.



Norman Bennett (left), Project Manager of Bioscience Technology Circle of South Georgia Work Ready Region; Tiffany Holmes, Assistant Director of Brooks County Development Authority; Penelope Schmidt, Director of Workforce Development at Wiregrass Georgia Technical College; Tina Herring, Director of Brooks County Development Authority and County Work Ready Leader; Dr. Ray Perren, President of Wiregrass Georgia Technical College; and Fred McConnel, Work Ready Communities Statewide Leader display a \$10,000 check to Brooks County for becoming a Certified Work Ready Community. The check was presented at an event sponsored by the Brooks County Development Authority, Brooks Chamber of Commerce, Brooks High School, Wiregrass Tech, and the Bioscience Work Ready Region to celebrate the certification. All certified communities could apply for a \$10,000 grant to further their workforce development efforts.

The Georgia Work Ready Program was implemented in 2007 in counties choosing to participate, and those counties included the four featured in the article – Berrien, Brooks, Cook, and Lowndes (Georgia's Certified Work Ready Community Initiative 2009).

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The Georgia Work Ready Program, a comprehensive and collaborative workforce and economic development plan, was implemented in four South Georgia counties in 2007. Lowndes, Cook, Brooks, and Berrien Counties have since made great progress in assessing the skills of their residents using ACT WorkKeys assessments. Lowndes, Cook, and Brooks each achieved the designation of Certified Work Ready Community by December 2009. Employers in those counties now have applicants' skill levels based on ACT WorkKeys assessments to use as a hiring tool and economic developers have a tool to help recruit potential industries to the area.

The Work Ready Program is comprehensive and consists of many elements, two of which this article examines. First, residents earn a Georgia Work Ready Certificate based on ACT's WorkKeys assessments in Reading for Information, Locating Information, and Applied Mathematics. While ACT is best known for its college placement exam, the nonprofit company also serves businesses with hiring and training tools such as the WorkKeys assessments. Upon scoring certain levels on the assessments, examinees can earn a certificate to use in a job search. The Georgia Work Ready Certificate is the equivalent of ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) and displays the NCRC seal, making the credential one which is recognized nationally.

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The second element examined in this article is the goal of increasing the high school graduation rates (HSGR). As noted by President Barack Obama, increasing the number of high school graduates is critical to rebuilding the economy and Georgia was among a lengthy list of states with unacceptably high dropout rates (Balfanz et. al. 2009). Although Georgia's statewide HSGR lagged behind the national average in 2006 with a rate of 70.8 percent, Georgia's rate exceeded the national average in 2009 with a rate of 78.9 percent and the Georgia HSGR climbed further to 80.8 percent in 2010 (Districts in Georgia 2007). Educators, students, and other supporters are to be commended for this progress. There is, however, still much room for improvement in order to ensure that Georgia has an adequately educated and trained workforce and this is certainly true in South Georgia.

By having members of the community become Work Ready Certified and by increasing the HSGR, communities can achieve the designation of Certified Work Ready Community (CWRC), which can help existing businesses find qualified employees and which economic developers can use to recruit new industry (Communities 2009). The progress of Berrien, Brooks, Cook, and Lowndes Counties toward becoming Certified Work Ready Com-

munities highlights the benefits and factors related to success so that other states and communities may find useful information in establishing similar workforce and economic development programs.

Along with offering the Certified Work Ready Community designation, there are several additional elements: gap training, job profiles, Work Ready Regions, and career pathways. The program includes skills gap training designed to help the workforce increase their skills through the use of KeyTrain, an online product available in these counties at no charge. Job profiles or job analyses are also provided at no charge for businesses to help them understand what skill levels are required to effectively perform a job and to thereby promote improved hiring practices.

Work Ready Regions are comprised of several CWRCs which join forces to expand a specific strategic industry, such as bioscience in these counties. Finally, the program includes career pathways extending from high schools to colleges to facilitate the transition from secondary to postsecondary education to better prepare individuals for employment in the strategic industry (Communities 2009; Job Seekers 2009; Regions 2009). The starting point for this comprehensive strategy is becoming a Certified Work Ready Community.

CERTIFIED WORK READY COMMUNITIES

The Governor's Office of Workforce Development oversees the Work Ready Program and established the goals for each county to achieve the designation of Certified Work Ready Community (Georgia's Certified Work Ready Community Initiative 2009). The goals are to certify specific numbers of both the current workforce and the available workforce and increase the HSGR.

The current workforce includes private and public sector employees and the available workforce consisted of unemployed individuals, high school seniors or recent graduates, GED students or recent graduates, and college students or recent graduates. The percentages of the current and available workforce needed to achieve the county goals were based on county size.

The counties' populations and additional demographics are shown in Table 1 (State and County QuickFacts 2010). In 2009, Berrien, Brooks, and Cook had populations under 20,000 while Lowndes County reached nearly 107,000. The CWRC goals based on these county sizes are detailed in Figures 1-4. The goals were to be

TABLE 1. 2009 POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR BERRIEN, BROOKS, COOK, AND LOWNDES COUNTIES IN GEORGIA

County	Population	Percent Ages 18-64	Percent Female	Percent Male	Percent Black	Percent White	Percent Other Race/Ethnic Group
Berrien	17,044	59.7	50.9	49.1	11.5	86.5	2.0
Brooks	16,354	61.5	52.0	48.0	35.8	62.3	1.9
Cook	16,603	59.2	51.6	48.4	27.7	70.4	1.9
Lowndes	106,814	65.5	50.6	49.4	34.8	62.1	3.1



Photo Credit: CJB Industries.

Andrew Wade and Billy Whiting prepare the Munson system for batch at CJB Industries, which requires the Work Ready Certificate in its hiring process.

achieved through a collaborative effort among stakeholders such as businesses, local government leaders, chambers of commerce, Department of Community Affairs, Department of Economic Development, public schools, technical colleges, workforce investment boards, and Department of Labor (Georgia's Certified Work Ready Community Initiative 2009).

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CURRENT PROGRAM

Work Ready Certificates

Tremendous progress was made in each of these counties toward certifying the workforce. Berrien, Brooks, Cook, and Lowndes Counties exceeded the number of Work Ready Certificates required for Certified Work Ready Communities as shown in Figures 1-4 (CWRC Progress Spreadsheet 2010). As of September 2010, Berrien County had a total of 553 residents to earn a certificate, which was 250 percent of the goal established by the Governor's Office of Workforce Development. Brooks had a total of 610, 280 percent of its goal. Cook County had 513 certified residents, 232 percent of its goal, and Lowndes County had 2037, also surpassing its goal with a total of 171 percent. It is noteworthy that each county far exceeded its goals for certifying unemployed residents, indicating that the public recognizes the need for skills development and certification.

High School Graduation Rates

Berrien High School, Brooks High School, Cook High School, Lowndes High School, and Valdosta High School demonstrated increases in their high school graduation rates from 2007 to 2010 (Districts in Georgia 2007). Berrien County has two high schools, Berrien High and Berrien Academy Performance Learning Center. Berrien High's HSGR increased during 2007-2010 from 79.6 percent to 81.5 percent, surpassing the 2010 state average of 80.8 percent. However, combined with the Berrien Academy Performance Learning Center, the HSGR was 75.2 percent in 2010. Brooks increased from 56.2 percent to 71.1 percent, a very impressive 14.9 percent increase during this period. Cook County increased the HSGR from 64.8 percent to 65.5 percent.

FIGURE 1. Goals and Actual Numbers of Berrien County Residents Earning a Work Ready Certificate by September 2010

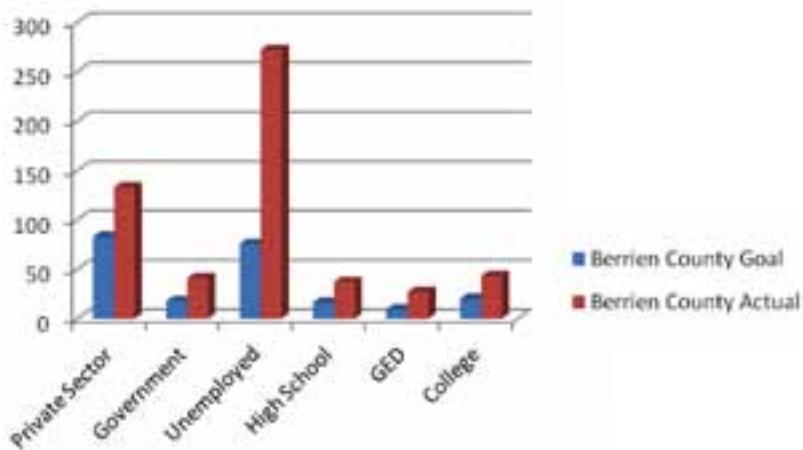


FIGURE 2. Goals and Actual Numbers of Brooks County Residents Earning a Work Ready Certificate by September 2010

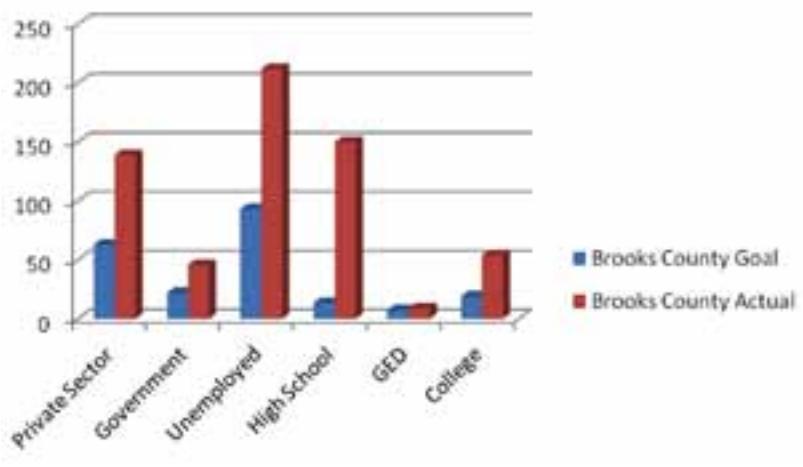
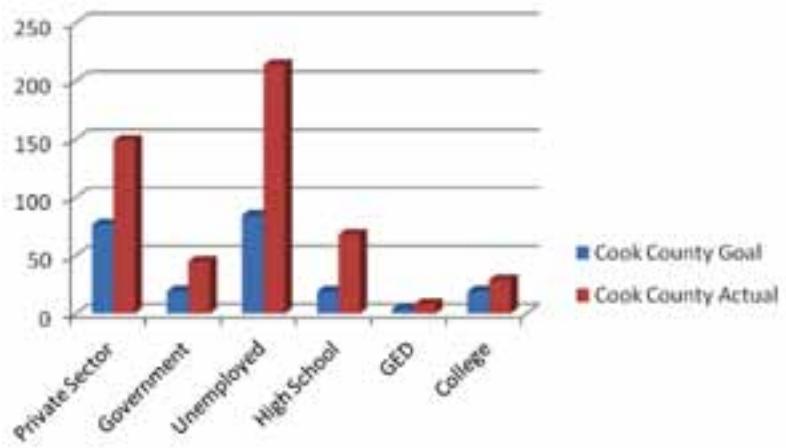
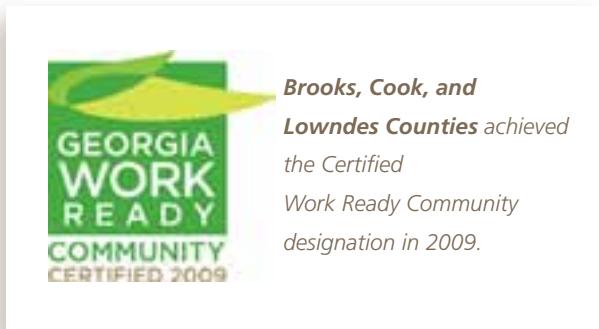


FIGURE 3. Goals and Actual Numbers of Cook County Residents Earning a Work Ready Certificate by September 2010



The Lowndes County area has two public high schools and both increased the rates: Lowndes High School increased from 78.4 percent to 83.4 percent, exceeding the state average by 2.6 percent, and Valdosta High School increased from 57.3 percent to 71.9 percent, an increase of nearly 15 percent in only four years. The combined rate for these two schools increased from 68.9 percent to 78.7 percent.

Both Berrien High and Lowndes High exceeded the national HSGR from 2007-2009 and it will be interesting to see if this is again the case once the national 2010 rates are published (High School Graduates 2009).



Certified Work Ready Community Status

As a result of meeting the goals for workforce certifications and achieving the required percentage increases in the HSGR, Brooks, Cook, and Lowndes Counties were awarded with the Certified Work Ready Community (CWRC) designation by December 2009. Economic developers in these counties can now use this designation to help recruit industries seeking a location to open their doors for business. In addition, chambers of commerce can use the Work Ready Program to help existing businesses to succeed.

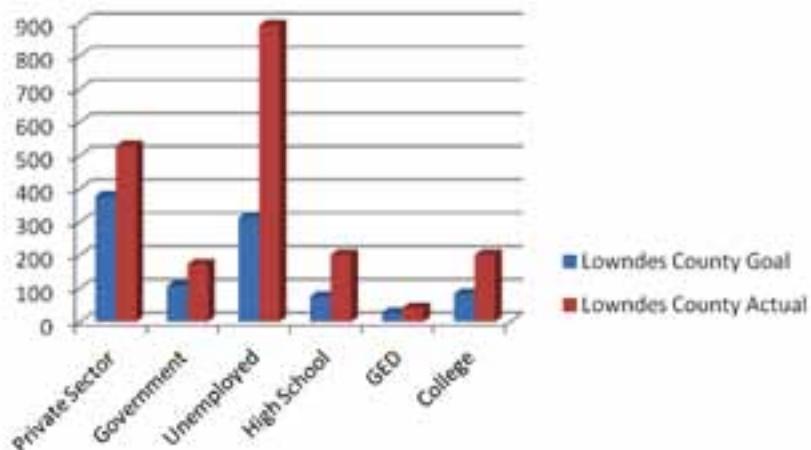
Although Berrien High's HSGR surpassed the state average, the combined HSGR for both schools in the county did not increase by the required percentage. Once this rate is achieved, Berrien will also become a CWRC.

BENEFITS OF THE WORK READY PROGRAM

Effects on Businesses

The Work Ready Certificates have been beneficial to businesses as evident by employers' use in the hiring process. Greg Justice, general manager of Regal Marine Industries (a luxury boat manufacturer in Valdosta) and Team Leader for Lowndes County in 2008-2009 stated, "I need all the information I can get to make good hiring decisions...We send all our candidates to Val Tech (now Wiregrass Georgia Technical College) for the Work Ready assessment. Last year...our turnover was cut by 150 percent. Good hiring decisions made through information received from the Work Ready Certificates are one of the reasons for the improvement" (Lowndes Makes Progress 2009). In an interview with the author (October 14, 2009), Justice also stated that after taking

FIGURE 4. Goals and Actual Numbers of Lowndes County Residents Earning a Work Ready Certificate by September 2010



Drew Patterson at CJB Industries in Valdosta, GA tests product quality.

Photo Credit: CJB Industries.

the assessments, several lead employees enrolled in the Supervisory Specialist program at Wiregrass Georgia Tech, thereby furthering their skills for the workplace.

CJB Industries, a company which formulates and packages chemical products in Valdosta, was awarded Manufacturer of the Year by the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce in 2009. CJB Industries requires the Work Ready Certificate in its hiring process and 90 percent of its current employees have taken the assessments (Manufacturer of the Year 2009, 21). This company is one of few which have grown during this

Businesses using the Work Ready Program

include Archer Daniels Midland, Arizona Chemical, BASF of Sparks, CJB Industries, Crown Health Care Laundry, Packaging Corporation of America – Clyattville, Regal Marine Industries, and Wild Adventures Water and Theme Park.

recession, adding a new facility and nearly doubling its number of employees.

BASF, a company which manufactures agricultural chemicals in Cook County, also includes the certificates in its hiring process, and in order to promote workforce development among current employees, the company offers pay incentives based on the skill level achieved (Lightsey 2009, 70).

In Brooks County, Tina Herring of the Development Authority stated that Crown Health Care Laundry used the assessments when hiring and Crissy Staley of Berrien County Chamber of Commerce stated that a number of Berrien County businesses use the assessments (Personal Communications, October 2009). A partial list of additional businesses in these counties which have used the Work Ready Program is on the Georgia Work Ready website and includes, for example, Archer Daniels Midland, Arizona Chemical, Packaging Corporation of America, and Wild Adventures (Employers 2009; South Georgia 2009).

Based on this information, area businesses and industries find it beneficial to use the Georgia Work Ready Program and the program has led to additional education in some cases. Given the recognition or requirement of the certificates in the hiring process and the possibility of pay increases for employees, individuals also benefit from being Work Ready certified.

Effects on the High Schools

According to interviews with high school leadership conducted by the author in November 2009, the Work Ready Program had little impact on the HSGR. In Brooks County, Sharon Cunningham, Career and Technical Education (CTAE) director for the high school, stated that the Department of Education's goals had the greatest impact on the HSGR. However, the school did use KeyTrain, an online product which is used to increase skills demonstrated on the Work Ready Certificates, to help its CTAE students. She stated in the interview that Work Ready is "a vital measurement tool for public school... in determining workplace readiness" and would like to establish a specific course to impart these skills to students.

George Ward, assistant principal for Valdosta High School, indicated that Work Ready played a small part in the school's increased HSGR but the school does use KeyTrain with CTAE students. Work Ready is nonetheless valuable for students and for school improvement.

Myra Fussell, graduation coach for Cook County High School, also stated that she could not attribute the increased HSGR to Work Ready but still sees value in the program. Cook County obtained a license for KeyTrain in 2010 to use with students.

Although the Work Ready Program had no apparent direct impact on the HSGR, the fact that partnerships have formed to support both higher graduation rates and the WorkKeys skills needed by businesses is noteworthy.



Photo Credit: Wiregrass Georgia Technical College

Holly Greene (left), Associate Provost of Wiregrass Georgia Technical College Cook Center and Kerry Waldron, Director of Economic Development for Adel-Cook County Economic Development Commission, show the road sign which will be posted in Cook County to show its designation as a Certified Work Ready Community. All certified communities received road signs to place in strategic locations throughout the county.

Collaborative partners included businesses, high schools, technical colleges, universities, economic development and industrial authorities, chambers of commerce, community organizations, and public agencies.

Effects on Counties and Factors Contributing to Success

During interviews conducted by the author during October and November 2009, the Work Ready Community Team Leaders reported that the program had been successful in their respective counties. Tina Herring stated, "We would consider the program to be very successful in our community. 'Work Ready' is becoming a phrase used frequently when discussing job searches or industry recruitment."

Kerry Waldron of Cook County stated most people "recognize that the assessment is a viable tool to determine skill sets of workers," and that through a series of Lunch and Learn sessions with businesses, the program

was "extremely successful in that we were one of the first counties in South Georgia to be certified." As a result of their success, they were featured in the November 2009 issue of *GeorgiaTrend* magazine (Lightsey 2009) and in a video promoting the program (Connecting Workforce Training With the Needs of Business in Georgia 2009).

Crissy Staley of Berrien County stated they had a high level of success in certifying their residents and pointed to local and state incentives which they used to attract interest in the program as critical to their success.

Greg Justice pointed to the high schools as critical to success in Lowndes County. Success also resulted from the support of many businesses which required the Work Ready Certificate and which conducted job profiles to ascertain the specific skills needed for their jobs. The profiles proved to be beneficial to businesses and thus drove the need for residents to become Work Ready certified.

In all cases, collaborative efforts were involved in achieving success. Although each county had some differences in the partners involved, they generally included businesses, high schools, technical colleges, universities, economic development and industrial authorities, chambers of



Photo Credit: Regal Marine, Inc.

Keith Hunter works in the cabinet shop at Regal Marine, Inc., which uses the Work Ready program.



Photo Credit: Regal Marine, Inc.

Dewayne Peacock and April Hall work on the upholstery CNC router at Regal Marine, Inc. in Valdosta, Georgia.

From the work that has been accomplished at this point, it is clear that partnerships are a key component for success. Inviting businesses, educators, government and community leaders, and economic developers to the table for the goal of improving the skills of the workforce is the first step toward enhancing a region's economic development and global competitiveness.

commerce, community organizations, and public agencies. In these four counties, Wiregrass Georgia Technical College provided a common link, offering the assessments and job profiles and also guiding counties toward their CWRC goals.

Recognition for Georgia's Accomplishments

To contribute further to each county's success, CWRCs will be featured in international advertising campaigns for Georgia and CWRCs received road signs to place at the gateways of their communities to display this achievement to anyone traveling in the area.

Georgia also received national attention for this workforce and economic development program from ACT in October 2009 with the ACT Community Development Award (ACT Recognizes Outstanding Education and Workforce Achievements 2009). Georgia was named the top state for workforce development programs by industry consultants (Gambale 2010).

CONCLUSION

This program is still in the early phase in which workforce development is a key component and this will be a building block for the future economic competitiveness for Brooks, Berrien, Cook, and Lowndes counties. Economic development through industry recruitment can take several years even in a robust economy. Although CJB Industries has grown and utilized Work Ready as part of that process, it is too soon to accurately measure the success of this program in terms of industry recruitment and growth. Nonetheless, the foundation required for a positive economic impact has been established and may serve as a guide to other states and communities seeking to make a difference in workforce and economic development.

From the work that has been accomplished at this point, it is clear that partnerships are a key component for success. Inviting businesses, educators, government and community leaders, and economic developers to the table

for the goal of improving the skills of the workforce is the first step toward enhancing a region's economic development and global competitiveness.

Success paves the way for even greater success and that is just what South Georgians are expecting as these counties join others in the next step to become a sustainable Work Ready Region. These counties are part of the nine-county Bioscience Technology Circle of South Georgia which adds an industry network of bioscience-related companies to the existing partnerships. These companies are helping shape educational programs to match their workforce needs and sustain their industry for many years to come. South Georgians are looking to the future with hope and anticipation as the economic outlook improves and even greater benefits are realized from the Georgia Work Ready Program. ☺

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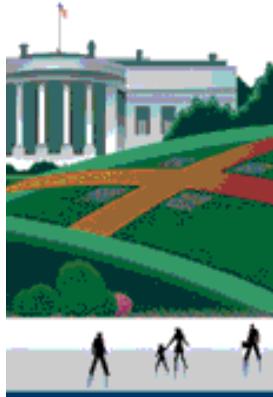
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