

Districts, ATCs, WSU arm students for future

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What training and education will it take to make you, your children or your children's children more employable in an evolving global economy?

No one knows, but area school districts, applied technology colleges and Weber State University all are working to arm their students with the knowledge and skills required to hit a moving target.

K-12

Ogden School District Superintendent Brad Smith says his district is focused on increasing graduation rates, which were up for 2012, and on curriculum reforms in writing and math.

"A report from Weber State said students from area high schools are woefully unprepared for math.

"I know we are preparing kids from high school who are unprepared for basic college algebra. We failed to make AYP (adequate yearly progress) last year, particularly in Hispanic students," he says.

"We are focusing on algebra and on literacy problems. Students who can't read well don't do well on math."

Districtwide in K-6, Ogden has adopted the Singapore Math teaching system, starting this school year.

Smith says the system focuses on teaching basic math concepts with concrete tools, such as single blocks for single numbers, 10 blocks glued together to teach 10s and 100 blocks glued together to represent units of 100.

Students move on and up from there.

"After they've got the basics down, they progress to pictorials and abandon the physical items," Smith says.

"They make that progression, from concrete to increasingly abstract notions, through all kinds of math concepts. It's a clearer, more effective way of instruction that allows the rigor to increase, and students can move faster."

In addition, this year, junior highs in the Ogden district are adding an honors program to raise academic standards, Smith says.

Jeff Stephens, Weber School District superintendent, says the focus on college and career readiness is more critical now than it ever has been.

"Our emphasis on college and career readiness is a proactive response to the economic downturn and the global competitiveness that our graduates will face in their future," Stephens says.

"Core standards in mathematics, English and language arts, as well as reading and writing standards in science, social studies, history and technical subjects, are aligned with college and work expectations.

“Further, these standards include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills. These standards clearly define the knowledge and skills students should have during their K-12 educational experience so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”

ATCs

Davis Applied Technology College and Ogden-Weber Applied Technology College representatives say preparing students for careers in high-demand fields has been their focus all along.

“We were extremely flexible with students and responsive to the market to begin with, so we haven’t made unnecessary changes,” says Colette Mercier, OWATC president.

So many students are holding down jobs, supporting their families or even finishing high school that OWATC makes accommodations, such as allowing students to start coursework anytime of the year and to work at their own pace, Mercier says.

“We can modify their schedule if they have another commitment or get a job or have two jobs,” she says.

As for keeping current, major employers serve on OWATC advisory committees and keep OWATC abreast of changing needs in the job market.

“They identify needs for the future,” Mercier says. “Our focus is on what someone needs to be competitive right now. We are always up to date or slightly ahead, based on our inside information from employers.”

Mercier says jobs that require only a high school diploma are expected to continually decline in the future.

“At minimum, you have got to have a certificate to be competitive. We are already getting calls that employers need more workers with specific, marketable skills.

“We like to say: If you start here, you can go anywhere.”

Michael J. Bouwhuis, president of Davis Applied Technology College in Kaysville, says today’s new workers may find themselves changing careers four or five times.

“The fact is, you need to be flexible and you need to gear yourself up with all the basic skills,” Bouwhuis says.

“If you want to be an engineer, you need to be a welder and machinist, too. If you become an engineer, it will be better if you know how to put parts together. When you design, you will know the fundamentals. And you can use those technical skills all your life.”

Bouwhuis says the way to overcome low labor costs in countries like China is for American workers to become more productive, creating more parts in the same time, for example. That’s possible with technology and skilled workers, he says.

DATC has had success with its composites program, which teaches students to fabricate strong, lightweight materials for industries such as aerospace, bridge building and other construction, marine, sporting goods and textile parts and assembly.

“The other thing we do at DATC is, we’ve created partnerships with companies and corporations, and

they bring in the equipment so we don't have to buy it," Bouwhuis says.

"It helps us train individuals in the skills these companies need, then we get our students out for internships. We can no longer afford to work separately. We expect industry to hire the people we train to their standards."

Weber State

Weber State President F. Ann Millner says WSU is Utah's most flexible university in terms of meeting student needs.

"We have always been focused on serving traditional, but also nontraditional, students," she says.

"We offer associate's and bachelor's (degrees), and we have 50-year history of dual mission. That's a hallmark for us.

"And we have a very large evening program, a large online program and many hybrid courses that allow us to bring flexibility to students. We've been doing it for years and continue to increase it."

Weber State also has secondary campuses and outreach centers, she says. The largest satellite site is in Layton, and WSU recently received state approval to buy land in Roy for a future site.

And besides a full slate of courses that provide students knowledge of international markets, customs, histories and practices, Weber State offers study abroad programs.

It also has many international students enrolled at the main campus in Ogden.

"Our students have those important international interactions and experiences, and they really understand other cultures, which helps them develop skills to work in those cultures," Millner says.

All those elements put WSU in a strong position to help meet Gov. Gary Herbert's goal of having 66 percent of the state's workforce possess a post-secondary certificate or college-level degree by 2020, Millner says.

"It's very important to Utah, and Weber State University is focused on doing everything we can to make that happen."