

MIDDLE RIO GRANDE BUSINESS AND EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE

Learning in the Second Wave

By Christopher J. Hogan

Incorporated in April 1997, the Middle Rio Grande Business and Education Partnership (MRGBEC) has developed a region-wide school-to-career system by managing grants and creating industry-specific business-education partnerships. It brings key leaders together for ongoing dialogue and decision-making related to implementing a school-to-career system across the region, and it has begun to encourage and advocate for public policies necessary to promote and sustain effective school-to-career practices.

MRGBEC initiatives seek to establish an integrated workforce system for Bernalillo, Sandoval, Torrance, and Valencia counties. This region includes a large urban school district with 90,000 students, in addition to smaller, rural districts of 4,000 to 8,000 students each. About one-third of New Mexico's population lives in these four counties.

In designing MRGBEC, as well as for its ongoing operations, its staff, board members, and volunteers have studied more established intermediary efforts in other communities. The lessons derived from this research have helped accelerate the development of MRGBEC, while providing insight into the limitations of adopting—rather than adapting—whole models or even specific practices.

MRGBEC's relatively recent creation under the School To Work Opportunities Act of 1994 has had an additional benefit in the context of federal workforce development policy. Although the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was enacted in 1998, the shift in public workforce development policy the act would bring was anticipated when MRGBEC was incorporated the year before. As a result, MRGBEC's founders designed an organization that would be compatible with WIA's goal of promoting cohesive workforce investment systems serving both adults and young people. Similarly, MRGBEC's regional approach parallels federal and state workforce development programs, which are structured around regionally defined labor markets.

Key Lessons

- The emergence nationally of an array of organizations performing the strategic functions of school-to-career intermediaries can accelerate the creation of new groups that can play these roles effectively in a growing number of communities.

- New intermediary organizations face the challenge of setting priorities for their convening and connecting activities. With few staff members and many local needs, intermediaries must choose their primary activities carefully.
- As a regional partnership, MRGBEC serves a coherent labor market, yet it must also recognize and value the unique history, context, and contributions of each of its communities.

Background Information

- **Mission:** The Middle Rio Grande Business and Education Collaborative serves as a catalyst for change and as the coordinator of business and education partnerships and school-to-career programs within its region. MRGBEC fosters and develops collaborations focused on: 1) education reform targeted toward high academic and employability skills; and 2) business commitment, investment, and involvement in standards-based education that ensures students acquire the skills needed in today's technical and challenging workplaces.
- **Structure:** MRGBEC operates primarily through volunteer committees organized around strategic goals. The 35-member board of directors includes 19 business representatives, a parent, a student, and representatives from K-12 education, postsecondary education, local government, labor, and community-based organizations. The president of the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce served as the 1999 board chair. The chair-elect for 2000 is the owner of several McDonald's.
- **Funding and Staffing:** MRGBEC is in its third year of state School-to-Work funding, with a grant of \$850,000. It passes most of these funds to school districts, particularly for developing curricula with a workplace context and providing work-based learning experiences. For direct costs, MRGBEC uses under 10 percent of regional School-to-Work funding, supplemented by funding and in-kind support from MRGBEC partners (e.g., Public Service Company of New Mexico provides office space). MRGBEC has one full-time staff person (the president) and one part-time employee.
- **Partners:** Key partners include Albuquerque Public Schools, Bernalillo Public Schools, Moriarty Municipal Schools, Rio Rancho Public Schools, Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute, University of New Mexico, Presbyterian Healthcare Services, Sandia National Laboratories, Intel Corporation, Philips Semiconductors, Public Service Company of New Mexico, Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce, City of Albuquerque, and Middle Rio

Grande Council of Governments.

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Historical Summary

While MRGBEC is only two years old, its genesis can be traced to 1987, when the National Alliance of Business created the Albuquerque Business Education Compact. ABEC, a collaborative partnership of business, education, and government, advocates for better learning, careers, and futures for all students. It is modeled after the Boston Compact, which initiated and has guided that city's linkage between employment opportunities and school improvement.

In the fall of 1995, following passage of the School To Work Opportunities Act, ABEC formed the Albuquerque School-to-Work Committee. Recognizing that Albuquerque employers and job seekers operated in a regional labor market, the committee chose to organize school-to-career on a similar geographic basis. In January 1996, it began planning a conference that would bring together the various stakeholders in a regional school-to-career system and begin to set goals for future activities. Throughout the coming year, the committee met with these stakeholders in preparation for the conference.

In January 1997, 180 people attended the "Middle Rio Grande Region School-to-Work System" planning conference. For two days, employers, educators, parents, students, and people from government sought to:

- Develop a clear understanding of school-to-career issues;
- Develop a common vision of a school-to-career system representing the interests and aspirations of stakeholders in the region; and
- Prepare specific follow-up plans.

The conference included brief presentations to foster a common understanding of school-to-career concepts and issues, but most of the agenda was devoted to working sessions. Small, heterogeneous work groups focused on seven "Critical Issues for School-to-Work": community awareness, sustainability, business needs, changing schools, business/education

partnerships, stakeholder access, and serving all students. The participants in these groups developed one-year and five-year “targets” for work at the local and regional levels.

Perhaps the most important conference product was a statement of a shared vision: “A community fully engaged in providing all students the choices and skills necessary to achieve their goals and be successful in life’s journey.” The participants also identified a compelling, “number one priority”: establishing a regional organization to oversee school-to-career activities and system building. Frustrated by competing requests from multiple school-to-career partnerships, employers wanted a single point of contact with schools. Educators sought a mechanism to facilitate peer learning across schools and districts.

ABEC would not be this regional entity, however: its board had decided against moving to a regional focus or a broader workforce development agenda. However, state-level school-to-career activity afforded an opportunity to fund a new, regional organization. In December 1996, the National School-to-Work Office awarded funding to New Mexico. The following February, the state solicited proposals for regional entities to administer School-to-Work grants, defining regions using existing service delivery areas for community colleges.

ABEC and its partners worked quickly and intensively to respond. The Middle Rio Grande Business and Education Collaborative was incorporated on April 28, 1997, and one week later it submitted a proposal to be administrative partner for the Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute’s region, which roughly corresponded to the Albuquerque labor market.

The proposal was accepted. In August MRGBEC received its first State of New Mexico School-to-Work grant of \$475,000. The award designated the new organization as the manager of state School-to-Work funds for the Albuquerque Public Schools, Bernalillo Public Schools, Moriarty Municipal Schools, and Rio Rancho Public Schools. That same month, MRGBEC hired its first employee, Celia Merrill, as president. (Merrill served as president until mid-1999; MRGBEC is engaged in a search for a new president.)

The board planned to keep the organization small, at least in its first few years. That way, MRGBEC could devote most of its state School-to-Work funds to local activities. Once MRGBEC had demonstrated its value to the community, it could seek further funding to expand its staff as necessary.

Today, MRGBEC functions as a coordinator among local educational institutions for their school-to-career program initiatives. It provides local practitioners with access to resources and information on best practices. For efforts that would be carried out better at a regional level, MRGBEC plays a

more active, direct role. Thus, it takes responsibility for raising awareness about school-to-career, conducting professional development activities, and making decision-making and implementation tools available for use throughout the region. MRGBEC also advocates for school-to-career policies and practices, and it monitors school-to-career efforts to ensure effective outcomes.

A Small Organization with a Regional Impact

MRGBEC directs most of its School-to-Work funds to its four Local Partnerships. Each year, some 90 percent of MRGBEC funds from the New Mexico State School-to-Work Office goes to communities in this way.

Through its decisions about these funds, MRGBEC influences the region's K-12 districts to focus on building school-to-career systems, as opposed to simply developing discrete programs. To support that goal, MRGBEC encourages districts to balance their use of funds using a matrix organized around five basic types of activity: school-based learning, work-based learning, connecting activities, professional development, and evaluation.

Also regionally, MRGBEC is forming networks that bring together the K-12 districts with community colleges to strengthen postsecondary involvement in school-to-career. Local Partnerships have begun participating in these networks, collaborating in at least one of three areas: curriculum development, work-based learning opportunities, and professional development.

In accordance with its decision to pass most of its funding through to the school districts, MRGBEC has only one full-time staff member and one part-time assistant. Instead of hiring more staff, MRGBEC relies heavily on its 35-member board of directors and board committees to implement regional activities. MRGBEC committees provide the context through which stakeholder groups collaborate across the region on both programmatic and system-building efforts.

The board creates these committees for specific tasks. As tasks are accomplished, the committees disband. Thus, in the first year, the Selection Committee hired Celia Merrill; Resource Development established a dues structure; the Nominating Committee identified people to serve on the 1998 board and as officers; the Professional Development Committee developed a presentation to build awareness on school-to-career; Building Linkages identified organizations and programs that are working in school-to-career initiatives; and the Consulting Contract Task Force prepared a request for proposals, reviewed proposals, and selected a consulting group to perform and follow up on a regional assessment. The Communication Committee,

which is a standing committee, created a communication plan and acquired a logo.

In 1999, several working committees met to accomplish specific tasks. The Outreach Committee connected MRGBEC with existing and potential partners, including school boards, superintendents, and businesses. The Curriculum Integration Committee surveyed best practices in instructional delivery and professional development, provided baseline data on current instructional activities, and guided improvement efforts.

Also in 1999, MRGBEC kicked off the Educator in the Workplace Program, beginning in June with a series of worksite tours, job-shadow experiences, and summer-long externships for teachers from schools throughout the region. About one hundred educators, business partners, and student guests registered for worksite tours of fifteen businesses. In addition, eight teachers spent several days in June and July shadowing a number of different positions at six private-sector and non-profit organizations, and 13 educators had summer jobs in four organizations. Educators participating in job shadows and externships attended a workshop that provided them with tools for translating their workplace experiences into interactive, real-world problem-solving lessons for academic classrooms.

One such tool, which MRGBEC developed in 1998, is the Teacher Training Tool, an interactive CD-ROM that presents information on employability skills and a model for incorporating them into classroom practice. The model emphasizes project-based learning, reflecting the belief among partnership members that this educational approach is the most effective instructional strategy for incorporating academic and employability skills. MRGBEC has distributed the Teacher Training Tool CD-ROM to every school in the region. (It is also available for purchase by practitioners elsewhere through the MRGBEC Web site.)

Central to MRGBEC's regional approach is its decision to create Industry Alliances. These industry-specific, business-education partnerships are MRGBEC's vehicle for developing programs and strategies to meet the workforce needs of the industry while providing work-based learning opportunities and career contexts for educational partners. Alliance activities can include: establishing and certifying industry skill standards, providing mentorships for students and externships for teachers, and partnering to develop curricular and instructional strategies within the industry context.

In the fall of 1998, MRGBEC decided to establish Industry Alliances in three sectors: health care, financial services, and retail. Currently, the Healthcare Alliance holds ongoing meetings; the other two are on hold, but an alliance is almost ready to begin activities in the construction and development industry. This partnership includes the schools of business, law, and

architecture at the University of New Mexico, along with the community college, several businesses, and a cluster of a high school and its feeder schools within Albuquerque Public Schools.

The Healthcare Alliance began a pilot program in the Fall of 1999. A cohort of sophomores at Rio Rancho High School take core academic classes (humanities, biology, geometry) and one elective (“Science of the Human Body”) within a healthcare pathway. Teachers approach classroom content within the health care context, using interdisciplinary projects that cross subject areas. The pilot also provides mentorships for a total of 30 seniors at Rio Rancho High School, Highland High School, and the Career Enrichment Center. The University of New Mexico’s Health Sciences Center, a program partner, will orient mentorees to the health care industry. MRGBEC plans to expand the pilot to more students and schools and also use it as a model for other Industry Alliances.

A “Second Wave” Intermediary: Learning from the Field

When MRGBEC was incorporated, many school-to-career intermediaries had been functioning for several years—and, in a few cases, well before the passage of the School To Work Opportunities Act. While the achievements of these efforts vary widely, their collective experience offers lessons and models. When MRGBEC has decided on certain actions, it has tapped into this body of knowledge, seeking relevant examples and models from the field.

That said, learning-from-the-field most often takes place as needed, rather than through a deliberate or systematic process. With a small staff and the discrete resources of its School-to-Work grant, MRGBEC balances the examination of best practices and lessons learned with day-to-day, operational needs and longer-term programmatic priorities.

One key to MRGBEC research into lessons from the field is that the organization not only looks at what other communities do but also why. For example, when MRGBEC was organizing Industry Alliances, Merrill examined why the people who connect Philadelphia schools and employers are on the staff of the school system, yet in Boston they work for the Private Industry Council. From these two models, MRGBEC gained insight when deciding the activities and focus of its alliances, the level of staffing they would likely require, and how it would implement them.

For example, the experiences in both Philadelphia and Boston pointed to MRGBEC’s emphasis on high-quality work-based learning, and it was also clear that getting educators and businesses to collaborate would require hard work. The lessons learned also indicated the importance of staff, whether in connection with the partnership itself or for implementing work-based

learning experiences. In the end, MRGBEC chose to begin with limited staffing, focused on serving the alliance itself. When the first Industry Alliance began to provide mentorships, MRGBEC could fund staff time with the grants it had already directed to the schools for the purpose of developing work-based learning opportunities. Reflecting MRGBEC's accelerated approach, the alliance has drawn on experiences in Philadelphia and Boston to move relatively quickly to a full program of all core academic classes taught within the industry context.

Even before MRGBEC's formal inception, the 1997 regional conference drew on the work of other communities. The conference organizers invited participation from the National School-to-Work Office, which sent Lois Ann Porter. A consultant, she had previously directed ProTech, one of the nation's most intensive and well-developed school-to-career initiatives, for the Boston Private Industry Council. The ongoing relationship between Porter and MRGBEC has brought to the Middle Rio Grande region a deep knowledge of Boston, as well as her broad experience with intermediary activities across the country. Moreover, consultants like Porter are crucial to MRGBEC's decision to keep its staff small.

MRGBEC continues to tap into outside information sources as it launches new activities. It has relied heavily on the National School-to-Work Office's Web site and Learning Center as central sources of information. That office and MRGBEC consultants provide leads for further investigations. For example, MRGBEC used the Web site and information from the Boston Private Industry Council while planning and implementing the Educator in the Workplace Program. In particular, the Web site offered information on BellSouth's teacher externship program and how that company used externships to leverage limited resources for work-based learning opportunities and reach the greatest number of students. MRGBEC gained further knowledge on BellSouth's program through the Web site of the National Employer Leadership Council (www.nelc.org), an organization that advocates and supports school-to-career initiatives combining classroom courses and real-life learning.

MRGBEC and the Workforce Investment Act

MRGBEC has begun to respond to opportunities and challenges presented by the federal Workforce Investment Act. With the passage of the act in 1998, Congress integrated various federal funding streams designed to reduce unemployment, help disadvantaged youth and adults receive job training, and provide work opportunities and support for former welfare recipients. A consolidated funding stream will go to state-level Workforce Investment Boards, which will then direct funds to local boards that plan, coordinate, and oversee policies, programs, and services for each labor market region.

In May 1999, the MRGBEC board voted unanimously to take steps to gain designation as the Local Workforce Investment Board for Bernalillo, Sandoval, Tarrant, and Valencia counties. This potential direction had been on the table since MRGBEC's planning and incorporation, when the general direction of the Workforce Investment Act was clear, even though its passage was a year away. MRGBEC's founders frequently discussed the opportunity for the new organization eventually to expand its school-to-career agenda into the broader area of workforce development. Indeed, the organizational name reflects this potential, avoiding the words "school-to-career." Further, MRGBEC's statement of purpose clearly allows expansion into workforce development activities.

In mid-1999, though, MRGBEC stepped back from this redirection. The board decided it was more appropriate for the organization to maintain its school-to-career focus—and that the political challenges of winning representation as the Local Workforce Investment Board for a four-county region were simply too daunting. Nevertheless, MRGBEC retains the potential for expanding beyond school-to-career to other workforce investments, and it has discussed revising the mission statement to read: to merge business and education to provide an educated and employable workforce.

Achievements

MRGBEC has had its share of successes and disappointments. While it has started a number of initiatives, participation rates have not always been as high as expected. The Educator in the Workplace Program, for example, was designed and piloted in MRGBEC's first year. In 1999, the first year of full implementation, 21 teachers participated in job shadows or externships, only 23 percent of the target of 90 educators MRGBEC set for the program. (Pending an analysis of participant evaluations, the program will likely move to a different approach to recruiting, possibly centering on the industry alliances.)

MRGBEC has developed plans for several Industry Alliances. About 20 employers are actively participating in Industry Alliance activities, along with representatives from K-12 education, community colleges, the University of New Mexico, and several vocational programs such as DECA and Youth Opportunities in Retailing. MRGBEC's Healthcare Alliance began a pilot program in September 1999.

Finally, MRGBEC has laid groundwork that will inform the Local Workforce Investment Board. It has defined and provided services on a regional basis, based roughly on the greater Albuquerque labor market area. MRGBEC's Industry Alliances are useful foundations for a regional sectoral strategy for employer engagement.

The Future: Plans, Priorities, and Challenges

July 1999–June 2000 is MRGBEC’s third year of significant funding from the New Mexico School-to-Work Office. Thus, MRGBEC plans to focus on putting in place elements necessary for a sustainable school-to-career system:

- Strengthen communication with all school-to-career stakeholders within the region to increase awareness and understanding of what a school-to-career system is, what changes it requires in education and business collaboration, and what benefits it offers;
- Facilitate, coordinate, promote, and evaluate education reform efforts within the region to create additional work-based learning opportunities for students;
- Provide and coordinate professional development for educators and business partners, which prepares them for effective delivery of integrated school-based and work-based learning experiences;
- Provide a single point of contact for business, education, government, community-based organizations, labor organizations, parents, and students to ensure accessible information on school-to-work programs, outcomes, opportunities, and resource needs; and
- Advocate for the policy, legislative, and regulatory changes necessary to ensure that all students receive an effective education, which prepares them with high academic and employability skills.

In the coming year, MRGBEC also plans to measure the effectiveness of its activities. Until now, MRGBEC has not systematically tracked its outcomes, but, Merrill believes, “the number one need for this partnership is that it must begin a process for systematically mapping and describing resources within the region, then evaluating programs, identifying gaps and overlaps, and recommending action.” With the recent purchase of an information management system, MRGBEC plans to track a variety of indicators, including:

- Capacity of school-to-career programs, as measured by the number of businesses, educational institutions, agencies, programs, and initiatives actively participating in the regional school-to-work system;
- Needs, as measured by a business assessment of the academic and employability skills of the entering workforce; (MRGBEC’s community college partner, Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute, is helping regional employers with this skill-needs assessment); and

- Outcomes, as measured by the percentage of high school graduates who enter the workforce in high-skilled, high-paying jobs.

MRGBEC is also looking for alternative funding sources. One option is to become a membership organization, like a Chamber of Commerce, collecting dues from its regional partners.

Key Lessons

The emergence nationally of an array of organizations performing the strategic functions of school-to-career intermediaries can accelerate the creation of new groups that can play these roles effectively in a growing number of communities.

MRGBEC has benefited from the experience of more-established school-to-career intermediaries. As part of the “second wave” of school-to-career implementation, it has been able to speed its evolution based on lessons and models learned from other organizations, initiatives, and systems. In particular, MRGBEC has answered questions and concerns about program logistics and management with research into best practices. Use of the National School-to-Work Office Web site and Learning Center in conjunction with outside consultants and national conferences has connected MRGBEC to valuable national networks and rich learning.

Newly created intermediary organizations face the challenge of setting priorities for their convening and connecting activities. With few staff members and many local needs, intermediaries must choose their primary activities carefully.

School-to-career intermediary organizations, especially new ones, must take care not to overreach themselves and promise what they and their partners can not deliver. At the same time, it is important to begin with activities that take into account plans for long-term sustainability and moving into more permanent funding streams to the extent possible.

This challenge is particularly relevant to MRGBEC, which has a lean staffing model combined with a mandate to serve school districts in four counties. MRGBEC has extended its staff’s capacity by drawing on the experience of other organizations and using a committee structure that engages partners in doing some of the work. Even so, it has had to embark upon a limited number of activities that it could perform successfully, enabling it to build upon that foundation in the future. By creating Industry Alliances, developing teacher externships, and convening key partners, MRGBEC has established its credibility locally and begun forging relationships among school-to-career stakeholders that could serve it well.

As a regional partnership, MRGBEC serves a coherent labor market, yet it must also recognize and value the unique history, context, and contributions of each of its communities.

Best practices can provide the nuts and bolts of design and implementation, as well as techniques for effective community involvement; they do not provide the local buy-in necessary to launch and sustain intermediary activities. MRGBEC relies on the active involvement of its board of directors, volunteer committees, and Industry Alliance members to design the region's initiatives. For example, the Healthcare Alliance examined existing curricula for its pilot, then developed its own, which fostered partner ownership of the resulting program. MRGBEC attributes relatively low participation in the Educator in the Workplace Program to its implementation of a model with less local input.

There is no substitute for the process of building local understanding and buy-in for a school-to-career system. MRGBEC manages state School-to-Work funding for four diverse school districts. One of them, Bernalillo Public Schools, was part of a federally funded local partnership before MRGBEC was even incorporated. Another district, Albuquerque Public Schools, is over ten times larger than the others. MRGBEC has had to nurture individual relationships in each district. It has tried to avoid a "one size fits all" mentality, helping each local partnership work within its own history and goals.

Acknowledgments/For More Information:

This case study was prepared in part based on interviews with Celia Merrill, President of the Middle Rio Grande Business and Education Collaborative. Other sources of information include: MRGBEC documents, the MRGBEC Web site, and The Middle Rio Grande Region School-to-Work Conference Report (January 1997).

For more information on the Boston Private Industry Council and the Boston Compact, which provided a model for MRGBEC's predecessor, the Albuquerque Business Education Compact, see: School-to-Work Intermediary Project, "Boston Private Industry Council: Creating, Implementing, and Sustaining the Vision," 1999, <<http://www.intermediarynetwork.org>>.

For more information on the Workforce Investment Act and school-to-career, see School-to-Work Intermediary Project, "School-to-Career Partnerships and Youth Councils," 1999, <<http://www.intermediarynetwork.org>>.