

## School-to-Work Intermediary Project Snapshot

### **Intermediary Organization**

Target Group, Inc.

### **Highlighted Activity**

*READY program:* A sectoral approach to linking employers and schools by providing a communication link among students, schools, and employers in the retail industry

### **Contact**

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### **Background**

In 1995, the State of Illinois approached Target Group, Inc., a for-profit consulting firm with experience promoting opportunities for youth and minorities through public and private projects. The state asked the Target Group to partner with the Illinois Retail Merchants Association (IRMA) to develop a school-to-career program focused on the retail industry. The initiative was one of several designed to help combat a high dropout rate (over 40 percent) among Chicago high school students. The resulting READY Program is a comprehensive school-to-career program.

### **Activity Summary**

The READY Program, a for-credit school-to-career program, helps prepare high school juniors and seniors for careers in retail operations and management. Students receive training, job exposure, and paid summer internships, as well as job placements after they graduate.

In addition to combating the student drop-out rate, the program was established to overcome two negative perceptions. First, the schools believed that the retail industry only offered entry-level, "dead-end" jobs. Second, retailers considered the public schools as warehouses that did not prepare students for their industry.

READY includes nine modules over the course of the junior and senior school years. Students also receive employment and support during the summer after the junior year, after-school employment in the senior year, and long-term employment in the retail industry after graduation.

Through its various activities, READY has created vital communication links among teachers, students, the IRMA (which represents 25,000 stores of all sizes and types across the state), and representatives from the program's participating retailers, including Crate and Barrel, Eddie Bauer, The Gap, JC Penney, Nordstrom, and Target Stores (no relation to the Target Group), among many others.

Regular feedback sessions, focus groups, personal outreach, teacher-business visits and exchanges, and surveys that track program participants all foster communication. Published by the Target Group, READY's quarterly newsletter contains updates on the program's function and supplements its classroom curriculum. Participants also come together bimonthly through the READY Advisory Council.

Important to READY's success has been Target Group's close association with the Washington, DC-based National Retail Federation. The NRF has been a key organization in the establishment of the retail industry's National Skill Standards, which form the basis of the READY curriculum. The NRF has also provided significant direct assistance in developing the curriculum.

### **Resources**

The pilot phase of the READY Program was funded through a joint grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and the Department of Community Affairs and Employment Security. The Chicago Public School System now fully endorses program, offering it as an option to students and also providing some financial support. Participating retailers contribute initiative, personnel, and input, as well as approximately \$500,000 per year in funding.

### **Evidence of Effectiveness**

- In its second year of operation, READY has engaged 14 schools and secured strategic alliances with 19 retailers. The program has offered coursework and summer placements to 297 students.
- READY has maintained contact with 78 percent of the 94 graduates from the first year of operation. Of these, 34 percent have gained employment in retail related to the program, 27 percent have gone on to pursue college degrees, and more than half have gained full-time employment.

**Sources of Additional Information**

Retail and Education Alliance for Development of Youth. 1998. *Program Overview*, Chicago, IL: READY.