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# Breaking Barriers



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# JOB NOW, CAREERS LATER



By Nancy Mann Jackson

Which of today's students will have successful careers later, and which ones will face difficulties in finding and maintaining employment? A number of circumstances can contribute to the answers to these questions. Some of the barriers that traditionally hold people back from building careers include socioeconomic status, language barriers, gender and race. Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to employment is the lack of a high school diploma. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, high school dropouts are 72 percent more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates. Simply finding a way to keep students in school can go a long way toward ensuring a strong future for them.

In Carrollton, Georgia, and Florence, Alabama, a local employer and local school districts have joined forces to develop a program that encourages students at risk of dropping out to stay in school. Southwire Company, which manufactures wire and cable used in the

distribution transmission of electricity, began working with Carroll County (GA) Schools in 2007 to help develop solutions to the problem of persistent dropouts. Together, they came up with an idea to help motivate students to stay in school, while at the same time providing them with real-world experience that would prepare them to enter the job market upon graduation.

This idea evolved into the program "12 for Life." The concept behind the name is that if students completed 12 years of education, they would have better, more fulfilled lives. It was a success from the start, and a second location opened in Florence, Alabama, in 2009. Since the first program opened in Carrollton in 2007, the local graduation rate has grown from 65 percent to 76 percent, and more than 420 students have graduated from the 12 for Life program. Of those graduates, 40 percent have gone on to technical school or college, 20 percent have joined the armed services, 10 percent have gone to work for Southwire and 10 percent

have taken jobs with other employers. "These are students who would not have made these choices or been able to make them before 12 for Life," says Gary Leftwich, manager of media and community relations at Southwire.

## Developing a Program

The seed of an idea for the 12 for Life program was planted in 2005 when Southwire executives learned from discussions with local school representatives that one in three students in Carroll County schools would not graduate. Southwire executives realized that fact had significant implications for the students, the schools, the community and for their company. "We need a pool of skilled labor to operate, and we require a high school diploma as a condition of employment," Leftwich says. "The dropout rate created a significant impact on our ability to hire skilled workers. At the same time, we saw the opportunity to help those at risk of dropping out to improve their futures. Studies show high school graduates earn

## Build Your Own Partnership

If you want to build a Southwire-type partnership with a local employer in your own school district, consider the following tips for successful public-private partnerships (also known as P3s), from the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships.

1. **Appoint a “champion.”** The most successful P3s have a recognized public figure, such as a school superintendent, to serve as spokesperson or advocate. Having such a champion helps communicate the value of the partnership to the public.
2. **Develop an organized structure.** Your school system should appoint a dedicated team for handling the P3 project, and that team should be involved from conceptualization to execution. If you’re starting from scratch, the team’s role will include developing a request for proposal and distributing it to potential partners, then examining responses and selecting a partner.
3. **Develop a detailed plan.** Make sure to develop a detailed description of the responsibilities, risks and benefits of both the school system and the private partner(s). Include a clearly defined method of dispute resolution.
4. **Engage stakeholders.** From the beginning, communicate openly with employees, the public, the press and others who may be affected by this partnership.
5. **Choose your partner carefully.** Ensure that your partner shares your goals for the program and has the financial capacity, the employee bandwidth and the longevity to pursue the project and see it through to completion.

about \$1 million more over their lives than those who do not complete high school.”

Sitting around a conference room table on a Saturday morning, Southwire leaders began brainstorming, and eventually asked themselves what would happen if they built a manufacturing facility specifically for students that would mirror their main factory, allowing students who were at risk for dropping out of school to get paid for working in the plant half a day, while attending school the other half of the day. Through a close partnership with the local school system, Southwire opened its first 12 for Life facility in 2007.

Students accepted into the program attend class at their high school for half a day, then work one of three shifts at the 12 for Life plant making real Southwire products that are sold by the nation’s top home improvement retailers. The Carrollton facility includes classrooms and science and computer labs, allowing some students to attend school on site, Leftwich says. Students receive a competitive wage of \$8 per hour, as well as class credit for working. In addition, students are eligible for a 50-cent/hour bonus for perfect attendance and another 50-cent/hour bonus for meeting production goals.

After the Carrollton facility became immediately successful, Southwire wanted to expand the 12 for Life concept. The company operates a plant in Florence, Alabama, where the high school dropout rate was more than 30 percent in 2009. Working with officials at the Florence City Schools, Southwire invested more than \$1 million to purchase property adjacent to its current facility and build a separate 12 for Life plant. Currently, 80 students from Florence High School are participating in the program, and 40 are scheduled to graduate this year.

“Lots of students find their identity by playing in the band or on a sports team, and that motivates them to stay plugged in at school,” says Corey Behel, Southwire program coordinator for Florence City

Schools. “This [program] is it for these kids. It allows them to be a part of something, to be part of a team.”

## Making It Work

So far, the 12 for Life program has been successful because both the school systems and the private partner are dedicated to making it work. “12 for Life would not work if it were not a true partnership,” Leftwich says.

Both the company and the school system have invested in the program. For instance, the school systems provide teachers, transportation and other services, Leftwich says. Southwire pays wages and provides manufacturing and classroom space. A board of directors—including members from Southwire and the school systems—governs the program, and the board meets monthly to discuss current challenges, frequently making tweaks.

In addition to strong partnerships with local school systems, 12 for Life programs also rely on their local communities for support. For instance, before each four-hour shift begins, students are required to attend a 30-minute class on life skills. While the on-site program coordinator regularly teaches those classes—which cover topics such as banking, decision-making, goal setting and paying taxes—local community leaders and experts often come in to lead those sessions, Leftwich says. Also, Southwire employees support the program by “adopting” individual students and serving as mentors.

## Making a Difference

For the more than 400 students who have graduated from 12 for Life, the program has been life-changing. “Many students have to make the choice of whether to stay in school or go to work and help support their families,” says Janet Womack, superintendent of Florence City Schools. “This program means they don’t have to make that choice. They can finish school, earn money to help their families and gain valuable employment experience that

helps prepare them for the next step.”

Getting those students to the next step is the program’s goal. “The main purpose is to increase students’ skills and keep them on track to graduate,” Behel says. “But when they graduate, they now have work experience, which is so valuable in helping them get another job.”

In addition to the employment experience students gain through 12 for Life, they also learn the skills that help them keep a job later on, like teamwork, following rules and cooperating with others. Learning those skills in a controlled environment, with built-in systems for accountability, has proven to be effective. “We use a lot of behavior modification,” Behel says. “Several of the kids we work with had a pattern of discipline problems, and this program catches them. Through the life-skills classes we require and the role-play that we do in class, they’ve changed. We put them in situations at work where they have to test their skills, and they feel so good when somebody recognizes that they are changing.”

Not only is 12 for Life making a difference for the students who participate each year, but it is also changing entire families and breaking cycles of persistent poverty and unemployment. For instance, students are chosen for participation based on a few factors, but chief among them is lower socioeconomic status and “a distinct likelihood that the student will not graduate,” Leftwich says. The program works to ensure a diverse workforce and makes no preference for gender or race. “Many [of our] students earn more than their parents on a per-hour basis,” he says.

## Spreading Its Wings

In addition to the 12 for Life programs in the Carroll County and the Florence City Schools, Southwire has assisted with the founding of a 12 for Life partnership between the Georgia Department of Corrections and the Monroe County Schools. The company is also working with the Great Promise Partnership to

raise seed money to assist other school systems in creating their own 12 for Life programs. Both the Georgia and Alabama facilities provide tours to businesses and communities from across the region to give them a firsthand view of the program, Leftwich says.

12 for Life is one of three programs endorsed by the White House staff for reducing the dropout rate. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs based a similar workplace component of its Great Promise Partnership directly on 12 for Life. State government departments, such as the Department of Community Affairs and the Georgia Department of Corrections, have formed 12 for Life partnerships with local school systems. 12 for Life has been the subject of numerous national presentations by groups like the

Clinton Global Initiative and Opportunity Nation. CBS News is working on a feature on the program.

It is easy to see why 12 for Life has been such a success, and why other school districts want to replicate the program, which is making inroads into the vicious cycle of lack of education, unemployment and poverty. **I**

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