

**Education & Workforce Development Taskforce
February 26, 2021**

Breakout Session 1 Summary

Q1. What education and workforce issues existed prior to 2020 but were exacerbated because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Educators are struggling to navigate the basics in a remote environment so there is less focus on career pathways and other secondary parts of education beyond core subjects.
- College seniors are struggling to find resources and opportunities for their first job post-graduation.
 - Four-year institutions can do more to partner with business or to ensure employability skills.
- The pandemic further disrupted access to higher education and career opportunities.
 - Vulnerable populations such as first-generation college students, students of color, and low-income families have been most impacted.
- Socio-economic disparities have become increasingly problematic.
 - There needs to be personal finance courses to help educate individuals on how to save, invest and plan, etc.
 - There are challenges associated with reaching certain student populations for workforce training due to lack of connectivity.
- The pandemic has resulted in fewer individuals seeking jobs and/or training assistance.
- There is still a need for soft skills otherwise referred to as essential skills, especially in a virtual selling and training environment.
 - Prior to the pandemic, companies/industry relied on face-to-face relationship building.
- Students are increasingly questioning the value of their educational endeavors.
- The pandemic enhanced the disparity between employer needs and student skill sets.
- Gender gap – COVID-19 has made it more difficult for women to be in the workforce due to childcare demands and so the ability to transition back afterward- is a concern.

Q2. Are there any new education or workforce issues that have developed because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- The pandemic created challenges with a transition to online learning internships, and remote work.
- The pandemic created a lack of internships because businesses did not know how or did not want to conduct them online.
- Higher education enrollment sharply declined since the onset of the pandemic.
- New technologies that require middle- to high- level skill sets to manage, operate, and maintain equipment were rapidly adopted by business during of the pandemic, which is leading to lower-skill/lower-paid workers falling further behind.

- The onset of the pandemic highlighted challenges with equity throughout the state in terms of access to technology and environments to work/learn for women/mothers, minority groups, underserved communities.
- Mental health is a growing concern in the wake of the pandemic, as individuals cope with health, economic and family hardships/responsibilities because of COVID-19.
- There is a little incentive for low-to-middle-skilled workers to return to work because unemployment benefits and stimulus are robust. In many cases individuals are making more money on unemployment than they would be working.

Q3. What is the single issue that presents the most pressing challenge for education and workforce development in the next five years?

- Modifying New Jersey’s entire system to better align academic offerings to industry needs. Then frame government initiatives around those offerings and needs.
- Expanding and fiercely promoting relationships between businesses and academic institutions to create sustainable communication and form an ‘ecosystem’ in New Jersey.
- Identifying which industries will employ the most individuals in the future and which industries will pay the best and then modifying curricula to align with those industries/jobs.
- Attracting businesses to New Jersey that are in high-demand industries to attract students and create jobs.
- Closely monitoring technological developments to identify disruptions to the job market.
- Promoting professional development and life-long learning as essential tools for successful careers.
 - Promote hope: A lack of hope in the future leads to disengagement and lack of desire to develop skills.
 - Workers do not work for the same employer forever so there is a need to continually improve individual employability skills.
- Incorporating “life coaching” into workforce development and education programs
- Transiting from information gathering to engagement, execution, and personalization.
- Teaching essential skills/behaviors: adaptability, analytical thinking, continuous learning and application, collaboration and communicating effectively.
- Aging workforce
- The need for quick hard skills, not necessarily through degrees. There needs to be a focus on certifications and micro credentials.
- Providing comprehensive support to students other than academic support, such as mental health resources and childcare.
- Preparing for the after-effects of COVID-19 in the K-16 education space, including but not limited to literacy rates, the digital divide, “learning loss,” the lack of internships/externships/experiential learning.