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SOCIETY FOR HUMAN
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Helping Students Stay in School

Business and education partners fight to keep high schoolers from dropping out.

By Theresa Minton-Eversole



Magen Merrill lived with her grandparents and father during high school in rural North Anson, Maine. Money was tight, and she worked as a waitress at a campground and restaurant to pay for her 1986 Chevy, which she parked downtown to meet and party with friends.

Merrill loved Maine's "small-town atmosphere and environment. But many teachers and guidance counselors see that as a red flag—when you want to stick around and not 'get out of Dodge.' My aspirations have always been to have a family and the simple life—not so successful, to some."

So Merrill, now 23, had few options after graduating from Carrabec High School in 2004, and there weren't that many jobs.

"A lot of kids from Carrabec start working, most of the time with their parents, and get stuck because other people depend on their incomes; you can't easily work a full-time job and still be motivated to go to school. High school pregnancy is also high in rural Maine. Try having a family and then getting a higher education while supporting a kid.

"I appeared to be heading down the same road," says Merrill. "What kept me from that future was the love of my family,

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Magen Merrill of
Cianbro Corp.
in Maine.

encouragement from Jobs for America's Graduates and guidance to a successful working career."

Not all high school-aged students are so lucky. According to the U.S. Department of Education, roughly a quarter of U.S. high schoolers don't graduate on time with a regular diploma.

Jobs for America's Graduates serves as a 28-state model for reducing dropout rates. The school-to-career programs at 700 middle, high and alternative schools and community colleges aim to keep students such as Merrill in school through high school graduation and provide work experiences that lead to better jobs or postsecondary education and careers.

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) served nearly 40,000 students in 2006-07 and has served more than 550,000 since 1980. More than 90 percent graduate from high school, with at least 80 percent moving into jobs, the military or college immediately following graduation.

Programs mostly run through nonprofit state organizations or state agencies. Sixty-two sites in Maine, for example, operate Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) programs. Since 1993, JMG has served more than 20,000 students at the highest risk of disengaging or dropping out of school. JMG served 2,745 students during 2007-08, and program specialists—considered the most critical points of contact with participants—followed up with 632 middle schoolers

and high schoolers from the prior year. Initially created to bring high school seniors from school to work, JMG now reaches into more than 200 communities.

Maine Gov. John Baldacci, who currently chairs the JAG executive board of directors, says corporate sponsors, along with a data-driven model of accountability, heighten effectiveness.

"Kids are coming out of school not prepared for work," says Gov. Baldacci. "There's this frustration in the business community; they're asking, 'What's going on?' JAG gives them an opportunity to create a partnership with education. They're being asked, even in this down economy, to at least interview JAG graduates, to provide internships and to continue to reach out. And they've been more than willing to provide those kinds of connections because they know that they need to have workers ready and trained for jobs."

Merrill was enrolled in JMG as a sophomore. As a senior, she fulfilled the job-shadow requirement at Cianbro Corp. in Pittsfield, Maine. Cianbro provides fabrication and assembly services to clients worldwide. Its hard-to-fill jobs include positions for pipefitters and welders, heavy equipment operators, electrical and industrial engineers, safety specialists, and project managers. She recalls her first interview:

"They offered me a summer internship that day; I learned a lot

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL C. HOLCOMB

and liked it. That fall, I started taking classes full time at the University of Maine-Orono while working part time at Cianbro, but I got burned out quickly. I didn't have the funds to live like most 18-year-olds like to live, either, and I enjoyed working more."

Now full-time manager of the document control department, she's still taking classes. In 2006, she bought her first home.

"I'm on the eight-year plan," she says jokingly, noting that she expects to earn her bachelor's degree in 2012. "But I'm very happy and have absolutely no regrets about my decision to both work and go to school."

Planning Tomorrow's Workforce Today

Like Cianbro, hospital management company HCA, headquartered in Nashville, Tenn., faces recruitment challenges. With operations in 20 states and 183,000 employees, the company signed on with JAG in 2003 to help fill its talent pipeline.

"We're worried about having enough workers to take care of our patients in the future," says John M. Steele, HCA's senior vice president of human resources. "We're interested in anyone who's interested in a health care career."

To that end, the company has set aside \$10 million in a fund to provide scholarships to students and workers in career transitions to health care jobs. Through Jobs for Tennessee Graduates, Steele strives to connect with workers and talk about health care careers.

"You're talking to kids who are going to graduate and who are likely going to be highly productive," he says. "You can't say that about every [youth development] organization you work with. But that's what makes companies that work with JAG comfortable about the time, energy and money they invest."

"It's really about helping HCA achieve its long-term business goals of finding talent."

For many students, such opportunities represent rare second chances. Andrea Weeks-Toy was 16 years old and four months

Too Many Drop Out

According to the report *The Condition of Education 2009*, released by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, only about 75 percent of the 2002-03 freshman class graduated on time with regular high school diplomas. Many factors are associated with measures of educational attainment, including graduation and dropout rates, immediate college enrollment rates and attainment of postsecondary degrees. They include:

- Student persistence and effort.
- Parents' educational attainment.
- Family income.

How the Program Works

National standards require that Jobs for America's Graduates affiliate state organizations help:

- 90 percent of participants finish a diploma program or receive a General Educational Development certificate.
- 80 percent achieve full- or part-time employment, or enrollment in postsecondary education or a full-time military post within 12 months after graduation.
- 60 percent secure employment in full- or part-time jobs.

National JAG analysts accredit and monitor compliance. A web-based national data management system tracks and reports participants served, services delivered and outcomes achieved.

pregnant when she moved to Virginia from Hawaii with her family. She enrolled in Bryant Alternative High School in Alexandria during the fall of 2001 and was placed in the Jobs for Virginia Graduates (JVG) program. She was also placed in a school Project Opportunity program for unwed teen mothers. Through the programs, Weeks-Toy received tutoring for class work and learned parenting skills.

"If I had enrolled in regular high school, I probably could have finished, but it would have been so much more challenging," Weeks-Toy says. The support "meant everything to me. The caring atmosphere at Bryant—that people want you to succeed—is critical."

Son Ian was born in February 2002; she graduated from Bryant that June, then enrolled in Northern Virginia Community College to pursue a nursing degree. Working part time as a phlebotomist during school, she was asked by JVG staff in 2004 to participate in a state job growth and training conference. There, she met HCA's Steele, who offered a stipend to help her finish nursing school, provided she agreed to work at HCA for two years.

"Students coming out of these programs are highly motivated to give back and appreciate having a second chance," says Weeks-Toy.

Reading, Writing, Recruiting

Global agricultural processor Archer Daniels Midland Co. (ADM) employs 28,000 workers, from laborers, operations personnel and commercial traders to engineers and research scientists. As with Cianbro and HCA, long-term recruiting remains a priority.

"We're hiring to build careers," says Michael D'Ambrose, ADM's senior vice president of human resources. JAG programs "give us the workforce that we need to fill our pipeline with talent to grow the company."

The program is especially important for ADM because a significant portion of its workforce hails from Decatur, Ill., a small rural region that was plagued with a large high school dropout

rate in 2006. D'Ambrose introduced JAG to Decatur that year—and the impact has been significant.

Today, the majority of Decatur's youth graduate high school. Yet D'Ambrose says more than the graduation rate has improved:

"ADM employees have partnered with teachers to help them prepare students for the workplace. And now, education, community and business leaders throughout the area participate in the education partnership," D'Ambrose says proudly.

With so many U.S. ninth graders delaying or never making it to high school graduation, "How does this nation not get this as one of its biggest crises?" he asks.

Personal Commitment: Not Child's Play

D'Ambrose, a former Toys "R" Us executive, introduced the giant toy retailer to JAG in 2002, says Teresa Orth, vice president of human resources for the 72,000-

Online Resources

For additional information about workforce readiness, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine for links to:

- Reports on workforce preparedness.
- SHRM articles on talent management.
- SHRM's Workforce Readiness Toolkit.
- A SHRM video about Jobs for America's Graduates.
- The Jobs for America's Graduates web site.
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for a Competitive Workforce web site.
- The U.S. Department of Education web site.

employee retailer headquartered in Wayne, N.J.; 2004 was the first year she represented the company at a JAG awards luncheon.

"I watched those students stand and tell their personal stories to a group that size and listened to how they drew their strength from the JAG program team members," recalls Orth. "It was a life-altering experience that helps you put your own life into perspective. After that, I asked how I could become more involved.

"But it's a business prop-

A Model for Achieving Workforce Readiness

The performance achieved by Jobs for America's Graduates is accomplished through:

Classroom instruction. Eighty-six activity-based and competency-based modules provide more than 860 hours of classroom instruction.

Employability skills building. Thirty-seven competencies focus on employability. They include job attainment skills such as taking pre-employment tests and interviewing; job survival skills such as time management, leadership and team participation; and basic skills training in communications and math calculation.

Adult mentors. Specialists help students overcome socioeconomic and academic barriers that prevent them from completing requirements for a high school diploma, securing employment or pursuing postsecondary education. They provide advice as students make career

and life decisions in ninth through 11th grades. Specialists also might connect participants to professional counselors to address barriers such as mental health problems or substance abuse.

Summer employment training. Job placement services help students find work during the summer, and partnerships with summer youth employment programs support year-round learning.

Student-led leadership development. A student-led organization helps motivate students, builds on the competency-based curriculum, and provides opportunities to develop, practice and refine leadership and teaming skills.

Placement services. Intensive, one-on-one employer marketing and job development activities identify entry-level job opportunities for students after graduation or completion of a General Educational Development diploma.

Likewise, specialists assist graduates in exploring postsecondary education and show them how to navigate the financial aid process.

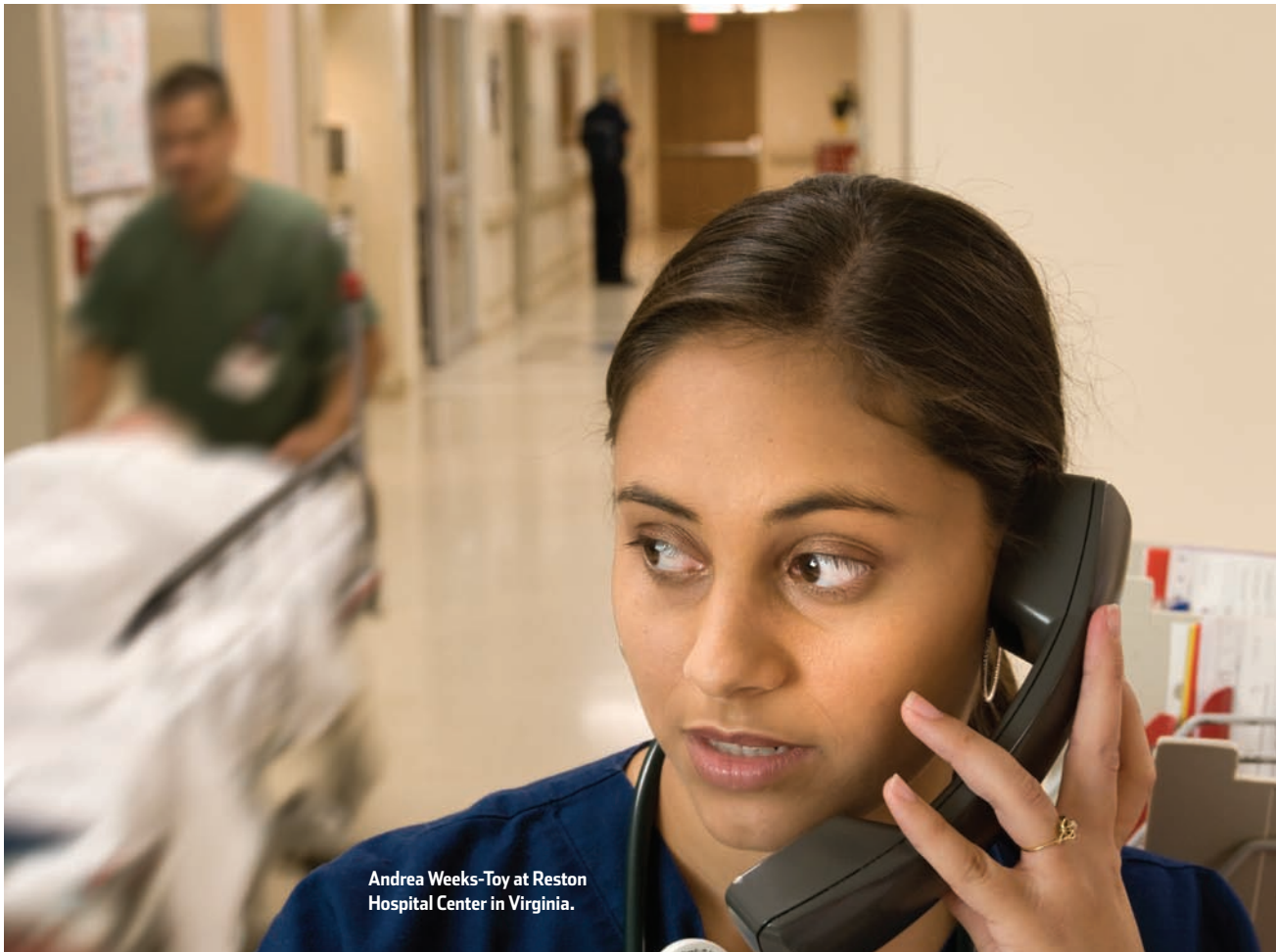
Links to school and community services. JAG programs serve as a school-based one-stop center for at-risk youth and deliver academic and social services.

Follow-up. JAG specialists provide no less than 12 months of follow-up and support on the job or in postsecondary education.

Accountability. Tracking participants served, services delivered and performance outcomes achieved provides a vehicle for holding programs accountable.

Professional development. Continuous improvement comes through ongoing professional development for staff.

—Theresa Minton-Eversole



Andrea Weeks-Toy at Reston Hospital Center in Virginia.

osition, too,” she continues. “Being pragmatic, it gives you access to a workforce that is well-trained, well-motivated, supervised. These students want to work, they have to work, and they recognized the value of work. This is about surviving, about life skills. For many of these students, it’s their first job, so recognize that you can give back and cherish the opportunity that you have to give that person their first great job experience.”

Toys “R” Us provides information about all open positions to JAG participants in many states. And since 2008, it has set priorities for JAG candidates within interview pools.

Yet in an uncertain economic environment, the retailer is being prudent in accessing its hiring needs. So, “We offer resources from our teams to help train JAG program specialists,” says Orth. Company representatives help with student competitions structured around skills like interviewing and resume writing. “They take these competitions very seriously; you can see it in the pride they take in their personal appearance, the level of detail and mastery in completing their resumes. It just gives

you a complete appreciation for the honesty and sincerity these students have for ‘making it out’ and for minimizing their at-risk quotients.”

Pay It Forward

JAG continues to be limited by lack of recognition among state governments and the private sector. Orth says the national organization is exploring ways to connect with JAG alumni and spur them to share their stories.

After receiving her nursing degree in 2006, Weeks-Toy went to work as an emergency room nurse at Reston (Va.) Hospital Center, where she remains today. She still speaks occasionally at JAG fundraising events. Now 24 and living in Burke, Va., she’s married and has two more children.

Merrill also does what she can as an alumna. In fact, Cianbro recently signed an agreement with JMG to make sure its students stand first in line for available summer internships at the company—and Merrill plans to work with them. **HR**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT RATHÉ