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## **Exploring Alternative Career Pathways: Expert Panel Discusses Labor Skills Gap, Middle Skills and Soft Skills for Students**

**(WESTCHESTER/PUTNAM/ROCKLAND)** — On May 20<sup>th</sup>, an expert panel of educators gathered to discuss alternative career pathways, the labor skills gap, middle skills, and soft skills training. The discussion, held at White Plains High School, was hosted by the Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board with **Thom Kleiner**, Executive Director, moderating. The goal was to illuminate options for mapping sector specific career paths as a viable choice for high school students as well as the significance of teaching and nurturing soft skills. Over 100 school board presidents, superintendents, guidance counselors, employers, and higher education professionals attended the discussion.

Panelists included **Dr. Michael Baston**, *President*, Rockland Community College; **Dr. Joseph Ricca**, *Superintendent of Schools*, White Plains Public Schools; **Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver**, *Career Center Program Specialist*; **Teresita B. Wisell**, *Vice President, Workforce Development and Community Engagement*, Westchester Community College; **Carolyn Chieco**, *High School Guidance Counselor and Consultant*, **Daniel Bonnet**, *Deputy Executive Director*, Center for College & Careers at the Guidance Center of Westchester, and **Orane Barrett**, *Chief Executive*, Kool Nerd Club.

According to the National Skills Coalition, middle-skills jobs, which require education beyond high school but not a four-year degree, make up the largest part of America's and New York's labor market. Key industries in New York are unable to find enough sufficiently trained workers to fill these jobs. Demand for middle skills jobs is expected to remain strong through 2024, with 45% of job openings falling in this category.

"This was an outstanding discussion that identified several areas where work needs to be done to improve educational opportunities for all. For example, we discussed the fact that a recent report identified that there were more middle skills jobs in the Hudson Valley region than there were individuals qualified to fill them so we need to do a better job of disseminating information about middle skills training and opportunities to the high schools, guidance counselors and parents," stated Thom Kleiner.

Dr. Michael Baston of Rockland Community College talked about the College's new Career Skills Academy which had their first students graduate on May 23rd. "Every college should offer the kinds of programs that allow students to live their best life. At RCC we are thinking deeply about the career skills that you need to earn a meaningful family supporting wage, looking at the opportunities in the

job market and designing programs through our new Career Skills Academy that meet both objectives,” stated Dr. Baston.

With the high cost of a 4-year college degree looming large for many families, the panel shed light on the alternatives and the importance of sharing information with students and parents so they can consider careers they have a passion for and can gain credentials and experience in, without the expense of a traditional four-year college degree.

According to Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver, “Career Pathways is about meeting people where they're at, knowing that everybody's circumstance is different. Some people are already in the middle skills position, so they need to advance to a higher skilled position. We want to ensure that there are multiple entries into the workforce and that there are opportunities to gain skills to move up the ladder when people are ready.”

Another part of the discussion was students’ lack of soft skills, skills that Orane Barrett, President of Kool Nerd Club, calls essentials skills. “Lack of soft skills is the biggest complaint we hear from HR departments and it's across the board for all types of jobs and education levels. Even candidates who have the desired technical skills don't make it past the interview because they lack personal skills like how to smile, greet people, communicate, and present themselves. It's an issue that needs to be solved,” stated Barrett.

According to White Plains School Superintendent, Dr. Joseph Ricca, soft skills training starts at home. “In White Plains, we're going to be looking at programming to work with parents and guardians to identify what can be done at home for little or no money that would set their children up for success. We're also going to look at how we can we make sure that social and emotional learning opportunities are part of the core academic program. We recognize that respect goes both ways, from teachers to kids at the earliest ages, and from kids to teachers.”

The panel was an extension of the conversation that was started at the Talent Shortage Symposium in October of 2018, hosted by the Mount Vernon Career Center, where economic development and education professionals and employers gathered to discuss the talent shortage and skills gap issues and the need to get career pathway information to youth earlier to help them plan for their education and ultimately fulfill the needs of employers around the region.



**Pictured L–R:** *Dr. Joseph Ricca, Superintendent of Schools, White Plains Public Schools; Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver, Career Center Program Specialist; Carolyn Chieco, High School Guidance Counselor and Consultant; Thom Kleiner, Executive Director, Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board; Dr. Michael Baston, President, Rockland Community College; Teresita B. Wisell, Vice President, Workforce Development and Community Engagement, Westchester Community College; Daniel Bonnet, Deputy Executive Director, Center for College & Careers at the Guidance Center of Westchester; and Orane Barrett, Chief Executive, Kool Nerd Club.*

### **Conversation Excerpts:**

**Thom Kleiner, Executive Director, Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board,** introduced the panel and framed the discussion, which was held at White Plains High School. **Mr. Kleiner** said, “I also want to thank Dr. Ricca and White Plains High School for hosting this important event.”

**Dr. Michael Baston, President, Rockland Community College,** continued the narrative saying, “Every career ladder in our college, every academic program should be able to show the student, when he or she comes in, what the possibilities are and what the earning capacity is at every step along the way so that they have meaningful aspirations and can take one step at a time toward their goal. What we're trying to do is really think deeply about the career skills that you need to earn a meaningful family-supporting wage, and then continue the journey to build the capital for success.”

**Teresita Wisell**, *Vice President and Dean, Workforce Development and Community Education, Westchester Community College* added, “It's not looking simply at middle skills jobs, but how those middle skills jobs serve as on ramps for our young people to aspire to meaningful careers, not just jobs. In the Lower Hudson Valley, there are more middle skills job opportunities than there are individuals qualified to fill them. So, unlike high skills jobs or low skills jobs where there are more of us than there are openings, in this one segment we have an opportunity to train young people for jobs where employers are ready, willing, and prepared to hire and continue to train people to move upwards. We have one of the most diversified employee pipelines in the whole region. And so let's talk about our young people as having assets, whether it's multiculturalism or bilingual capabilities, that they can bring to the workplace.”

**Dr. Joseph Ricca**, *Superintendent of Schools, White Plains Public Schools*, welcomed everyone to White Plains and thanked them for being part of this important conversation. He stated, “Ten years ago, 15 years ago, the unintended consequences of an enormous shift in K-12 education to college, college, college, college has put us in this position. I don't even like the sort of negative connotations associated with some of the terms we use such as ‘middle skills.’ They are simply job skills, career skills. When you talk about middle skills and low skills, how do you think that that makes folks who are thinking about those positions feel about going into those positions? We've got to change that. We've got to work together to reduce the stigma associated with these very important positions. So even like ‘soft skills.’ I'm going to suggest to you that those are essential skills – communication, how you're able to relate to people working together.”

**Dr. Baston** continued, “I think one of the most important things I'm hearing from this conversation is that we created these conditions. So, the fact that we're talking about essential skills, soft skills and yet parents would put an iPad in their child's hand at age one and allow their child to not talk to them while they're on their cell phone or allow their child to avoid any responsibilities. Well then, parents put the child in the place where now they have the inability to navigate the complexities of the world because everything was made so simple. The question becomes how can we change and do a course correction to a 16, 17, 18 year old that has been basically allowed to be a two or three or four year old all their life. And so, we have to get to the place where we're serious about how we're going to communicate this.” He added, “If a community college offers careers skills academies, guess what, the student is in college, and so we have to continue together to make the message clear that college is available. Every program might not be available for every student because every student may not have every aptitude for every program but if you go into a middle skills school program at Westchester Community College or Rockland Community College, the students are in college, even if they're not in degree programs.”

**Carolyn Chieco**, *High School Guidance Counselor and Consultant*, said, “The other experience that I think needs to happen is that all students, aside from the students who are taking the business courses, need a course on the ‘world of work,’ whereby a student learns how to make eye contact, shake hands, and start a resume that can help them approach positions, even for summer jobs.”



**Orane Barrett**, *Chief Executive*, Kool Nerd Club, asked, “Why is it that the schools are not focusing on this at the earliest age? So that it is not a last minute readjustment of an adult at a later stage but rather do more at a younger stage of life than can ingrain traits that will help a person keep a job at a later stage.”

**Carolyn Chieco** added, “As a guidance counselor, we are told that the graduation rate matters. You want a student to graduate and pass the five Regents exams. So how do you then find enough time to guide 200 or 300 students, or however many are in your caseload, to develop these really important skills that are to me the heart and the soul of what makes a good citizen. And that's the dilemma.”

**Daniel Bonnet**, *Deputy Executive Director*, Center for College & Careers at the Guidance Center of Westchester, said, “It's essential for schools to collaborate with community based organizations. We know a kid needs to get a job, get training, develop soft skills to be successful. But as my staff and I kind of read into this, it goes even deeper and further. How do I expect this young man to be successful when his environment at home is not stable? So if there's a mental health issue, we need to address that first. If there's substance abuse, we need to address that first. If the family's not eating, we need to address that first. So, the idea is in order for this young person to be successful, the family needs to be successful.”

**Dr. Ricca** continued, “We're definitely taking a much more focused approach to individualized student education than we were 20 years ago without a doubt. But, I think we also have to make sure that we are committed at the school level, to breaking down barriers and to ensuring that everyone in our student body has equal opportunity. That has to be the model, that has to be the push. When we walk into Advanced Placement classes or we walk into Continuing and Technical Education classes, it should be a diverse classroom – diversity of look, diversity of ideas, diversity of socioeconomic levels. We need to make sure that every one of our kids feels like and knows that he or she has the opportunity.”

**Teresita Wisell** elaborated, saying, “I think we have to change the narrative so that we're not telling a young person ‘you're going to Westchester Community College to be a home health aide’ or ‘you're going to NYU and onto medical school.’ It's not one or the other. It can be both.”

**Dr. Baston** concluded saying, “We need to be mindful that structural racism exists. We've got to be mindful of the fact that if we are not engaging in equitable outcomes, we have structures, systems, policies, and approaches that actually veer people into one opportunity or another. If we continue to allow our students who are in poverty to pursue academic programs that will keep them in poverty and ultimately impoverished, they won't be able to lead a meaningful life. We've got to be honest about that and we've got to call it out. So, as we look at where students are going, we will have to do things in an equitable way. And people like to talk a lot about multiculturalism and diversity and that sort of thing because that makes us feel inclusive. But when we're talking about equity, and that means taking these resources and redirecting them to these issues to change these outcomes.”

**THE WESTCHESTER-PUTNAM WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD (WPWDB)** is comprised of leaders and staff of state and county government agencies, non-profits, public education, and the private sector who work together to strengthen the partnerships between business, education, and service providers within the “Career Center Network” to meet the needs for a skilled workforce. The WPWDB pursues funding opportunities and develops model programs and leading-edge practices. The “Network” is made up of four Career Centers (White Plains, Mount Vernon, Peekskill, and Carmel) as well as partner agencies that provide state-of-the-art technology, training, resources, and services to youth, adults and employers. For more information, visit [www.westchesterputnamonestop.com](http://www.westchesterputnamonestop.com).

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