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## WORK-BASED LEARNING IN ACTION

# OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUTH MEETS BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY: WEGMANS & HILLSIDE WORK-SCHOLARSHIP CONNECTION

**Work-Based Learning in Action is a series of case studies highlighting effective models of work-based learning. This case study is part of Walmart's work with JFF, [Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail](#), and covers companies that have implemented valuable work-based learning programs that provide lessons for employers creating or redesigning their own retail work-based learning program.**

Wegmans, a regional supermarket chain, is one of the largest private companies in the US, with 47,000 employees. Over a quarter of the Wegmans workforce are high school- and college-aged students. Wegmans recognizes that the success of these young workers translates into company success, and it has translated this into its training investments. Through its 30-year engagement as a founding leader and now core partner to the

Hillside Family of Agencies, Wegmans has supported the Work-Scholarship Connection program in its work to help young people graduate from high school and launch their careers. The Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection (HW-SC) blends supports for high school graduation with work-based learning, in turn creating a talent pipeline for Wegmans. As Meghan Wagner, director of the HW-SC Jobs Institute, describes,

the program design builds on the idea that work and career experiences are not always linear, “but there’s a pathway here that we can help young people understand that every experience ties into the next opportunity.”

As the HW-SC has grown and expanded its employer partnerships, it continues to be valued by Wegmans for its ability to support business goals of diversity and greater worker retention. The program design provides consistent mentorship to the student through a youth advocate, integrates both college and career supports, provides transportation to alleviate a common barrier to employment, and uses data to ensure continuous program improvement.

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***“If you had the choice, would you rather have a student who has gone through this . . . training versus a student who has not? . . . We can show you a clear advantage.”***

*– HW-SC Program Director*

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Beyond these design elements that foster success for participating youth, two aspects of Wegmans’ engagement with the HW-SC maximize the program’s business impact. First, the HW-SC employees are held to the same standards as any other employee. Second, Wegmans’ leadership is committed both to the program and a culture of internal advancement.

## **PROGRAM ORIGINS**

In the mid-1980s, Wegmans, a regional supermarket chain with over 90 stores in the eastern United States, faced a troubling reality: a 100 percent turnover rate among its young part-time workers. At the same time, leaders in Wegmans’ home base of Rochester, New York, were organizing to find solutions to a high dropout rate among the diverse high school population. Wegmans launched a pilot work-based learning program in 1987 with 30 ninth graders to jointly combat both of these problems. At the end of four years, Wegmans’ Work-Scholarship Connection graduated 29 students, with 26 enrolled in college.

Ten years later, the program became an independent nonprofit, the HW-SC, part of the nonprofit network Hillside Family of Agencies, in an effort to expand the success of the program. Building on that first cohort of 30 students in Rochester, the program now also operates in Buffalo and Syracuse, plus surrounding suburbs, as well as Prince George’s County, Maryland. There are 4,000 students enrolled in the program, about 700 of whom work for Wegmans, and an expanded group of employer partners, including university, health care, and food services employers.

The HW-SC tagline is “Graduation. College. Career.” with the key goal of increasing the on-time high school graduation rate, particularly in comparison to district students who are not enrolled in the program. In addition, the priority is to graduate students who are college and career ready. This is

## Wegmans' HW-SC: Fast Facts

The HW-SC and its employer-partners provide:

- Recruitment of low-income youth, starting as early as seventh grade
- Eligible students have at least 2 of 6 risk factors
- Up to 6 years of program services (through high school graduation), including mentoring, social and life skills, academic support, and career and college preparation
- 24 hours of classroom training in Youth Employment Training Academy (YETA), focusing on soft skills and interview tactics
- Paid employment with Wegmans, conditional on in-school performance
- Youth advocate, employment specialist, career specialist, college specialist, and employer mentor to support participants

important because it emphasizes the importance of continued learning as part of work.

Wegmans views the program as critically important to business priorities such as diversity and retention, as well as high-quality customer service and ensuring a pipeline for management positions. Sarah Armignacco, chief educational

initiatives officer at Wegmans, explains that the youth engaged through this program have long-term career prospects at the company. "From a business objective standpoint, [we rely] on making sure that [the HW-SC] population is really skilled and versatile to be able to interact with our customers but then also, in order to keep them and retain them, to grow them through our organization, almost like a pipeline strategy. [I]f they have the interest in becoming a full-time employee with Wegmans and moving up through the company, then there's that opportunity to do so."

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The HW-SC offers a continuum of services that begin in high school, build to additional classroom training, and culminate in paid work experience. The Youth Employment Training Academy (YETA) serves as the gateway into employment opportunities, providing a student with employability skills and then connections to employers. Throughout the program, participating youth build their employability skills as they are supported by a youth advocate and workplace mentor. The core services model at the HW-SC is a full developmental model that supports participants until their eligibility concludes when they graduate from high school.

Students are recruited for participation in the HW-SC through their schools. The HW-SC embeds youth advocates, who

## The HW-SC Supports Core Work-Based Learning Principles

JFF's report [\*Making Work-Based Learning Work for Retail\*](#) outlines seven core principles to guide the design of high-quality work-based learning that supports the success of low-income individuals seeking to enter and advance in their careers. HW-SC offers many of these design components:

- Supports entry into career track
- Provides meaningful job tasks that build career skills and knowledge
- Identifies target skills and validates gains
- Provides compensation
- Rewards skills development
- Supports college entry, persistence, and completion
- Provides comprehensive participant supports

are HW-SC employees, on site in schools in the participating districts. To qualify for the program, students must have at least two of six risk factors: low socioeconomic status, low standardized test scores, failing two to three core subjects, over-age for grade, record of low attendance, or a record of school suspension. Students then work to become “AAA Ready,” qualifying them to enroll in YETA once they are at least 15 years old.

Students who start in middle school spend years in the HW-SC program before becoming YETA eligible, while older students must be in the program for a minimum of about six months before eligibility. This initial period

### Youth Employment Training Academy's “AAA Ready” Qualifications

- **Academics:** No Ds or Fs in any subject; 2.0 or above in all core subjects
- **Attendance:** 93 percent daily attendance
- **Attitude:** Ready and willing to take on work experience on top of their school life and their family life; demonstrated commitment to YETA

provides time for assessments while achieving AAA status. YETA is the core workforce development element of the HW-SC and consists of 25 hours of live classroom training offered on weekends, after school, or during school breaks. The curriculum, led by an HW-SC employment specialist, was designed for the HW-SC by an instructional designer with input from staff and students.

The topics covered include training in areas such as effective communication, self-managing, managing workplace gossip, listening to authority, and time management. Tactical training in areas such as interview preparation is also included. The curriculum is delivered in cohorts that range from 10 to 70 students, depending on the region.

YETA also includes exposure to jobs in industries throughout the region and is adaptable to local demand. For example, a survey of participants in the Rochester area found that about one-third were interested in the health care field. To meet this need, the HW-SC has cultivated a relationship with area hospitals, including the University of Rochester. One of the benefits of the model is that it is standardized yet flexible enough to meet students where they are.

At the conclusion of the program, students are “YETA certified” and have a portfolio that consists of a completed, error-free resume, a cover letter, and a reference sheet. YETA-certified students are invited to interview with partner employers.

Wagner explains that “it is still a competitive process. I call it facilitated but competitive, though we do allow for access and opportunity for our young people that may not be sitting in front of these employers otherwise. But they have to earn that job through that interview and application process.”

The Jobs Institute is the hub of the HW-SC’s job-readiness and job-placement services. The institute oversees program strategy and development, quality review, and staff development for the regional employment, college, and career specialist teams. It also conducts strategic employer outreach, especially in new and expanding regions.

Once hired, the employer-employee relationship is the same as with any

worker, buttressed by ongoing supports provided through a youth advocate and employment specialist. After facilitating the placement, the employment specialist connects with the employer on at least a monthly basis.

Because the goal of the program is high school graduation, students are required to maintain their AAA status and employers may be asked to take an employee off the schedule if there are academic or discipline problems at school.

Throughout the placement, HW-SC staff are available to coach the student employee so that the student learns to communicate needs and challenges to their supervisor.

Participants are assigned a mentor at work, typically their department manager or a manager from the next level up, who checks in with them and makes sure that they are equipped for success at work.

If issues arise, the youth advocate connects with the mentor to find a resolution. The mentor also makes sure the student has the opportunity to get the training to advance in their skills so they can progress and be successful.

## **PROGRAM RESULTS**

The impact of the HW-SC can be measured in terms of the impact on participating youth, the community at large, and Wegmans or other participating employers. The impact on youth is clear. In a district with an

average graduation rate of 60 percent in 2016, 81 percent of students who enrolled in the HW-SC their first year of high school graduated.

The results are even more pronounced for students who became YETA-certified and worked for an employer partner, with a graduation rate of 96 percent. This success translates into broader benefits across a community. An independent cost-benefit study by researchers at the University of Rochester concluded that, for students who are certified by the program and remain employed, over \$8.50 in community benefits are generated for every \$1 in program expenses.\*

The program has also helped Wegmans with its business priorities. The current turnover rate for part-time high school- and college-aged Wegmans employees is now a fraction of the rate from the 1980s that helped spur the creation of the HW-SC. The rate has dropped from 100 percent to approximately 30 percent.

Wegmans also tracks the career progression for student employees, the number of students who stay employed with them after high school graduation, the number of students who are employed part time during college, and the participation of HW-SC graduates in their management intern program. More than 40 current full-time management employees graduated from the HW-SC program. Armignacco notes that “many of those employees are in our new market areas running departments that generate thousands and thousands of dollars in profits. These are not roles where people are kind of given a pass

... but these are profitable roles that everyone had to compete and meet those standards in order to get them. So, we know it works; we believe in it.”

The impact of the HW-SC on Wegmans is not unique among employers. According to Rod Green, executive director for business expansion at Hillside Family of Agencies, the general value proposition to a business weighing hiring young people through the program versus directly is compelling. “If you had the choice, would you rather have a student who has gone through this work, that is supported by a youth advocate, that has gone through 25 hours of soft-skills training versus a student who has not had that? ... [W]e can show you a clear advantage.”

## LESSONS FOR SUCCESS

The HW-SC is a complex, long-term program that has grown over several decades because of a variety of design elements that ensure its success. Several of these factors are embedded in the HW-SC itself. But the degree to which the program has been able to impact the business goals of Wegmans emanate from Wegmans’ standards for HC-SW employees and the company’s leadership commitments.

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\* Karen J. DeAngelis, Chelsea BaileyShea, and Daniela Luengo Aravena, *The Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection Benefit Cost Ratio Analysis* (Rochester: Warner School of Education, University of Rochester, 2015), <https://www.hillside.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HWSC-Cost-Benefit-Analysis-Final-Report-12-11-15.pdf>.

## ALUMNI PROFILE

### Aundray Harding

Aundray entered the HW-SC program in the 1990s as a high school student in Rochester, New York. He was introduced to the program by his guidance counselor and was soon connected with a youth advocate. Aundray describes his youth advocate as a combination of a second mother and a counselor. She checked on him regularly when he was a high school student in the program—and also when he was away at college, including calling his mother to see how things were progressing at school. Throughout college, Aundray would work at his local Wegmans when he was home for school breaks, and Wegmans provided him with a scholarship that primarily covered the costs of his college books.

Following college graduation, he decided to work at Wegmans full time. As Wegmans expanded into new markets, he took the opportunity to move, and applied for a position in New Jersey. Aundray later moved to a Wegmans store in Prince George's County, where he was recently promoted to store manager.



Aundray's career has come full circle: there are over 30 current HW-SC participants working in his store and he serves as an example to them of the impact of the program. As a participant in the HW-SC, Aundray values the fact that, at Wegmans, employees control their professional development and can use a self-guided path to find new opportunities in the organization.

## Mentoring

The HW-SC positions youth for success at each stage of the program by providing several complementary roles for customized support of the student. It provides an employment specialist to support a student with job readiness and identifying a job as well as a youth

advocate who acts as an overall navigator and mentor for the participant. The employer provides a mentor as a resource in the workplace. The more than 130 youth advocates across the regions are central to the HW-SC model. They are responsible for mentoring, meeting

with students' families, and ensuring necessary academic supports, such as tutoring and test preparation. They also engage with teachers to understand classroom issues and work with students and families to identify barriers that may be impacting student performance at home or at work. Since they are located in the schools, youth advocates are expected to have regular contact with students and monitor both behavioral and performance issues at school. In addition, once students are placed in employment, the youth advocate is the primary point of contact for the employer mentor. The youth advocates receive standardized training.

Wegmans' Ty Kelly, director of youth services, emphasizes the ability of the advocate to form a bridge between the student's work, home, and school lives: "When it comes down to us trying to make the best decision for our employee, we have somebody who brings in some more intelligence that we can [use to] improve the decisions we're going to make [for] the individual. We want to make sure we're focusing in on the right thing, and on the right things, and that we're not burdening somebody that's going through some troubling times and they think that nobody's here for them."

## Dual College and Career Supports

The HW-SC developed a model that focuses on both college and career readiness, based on analysis of student pathways. The HW-SC's Jobs Institute has established grade-level specific college- and career-readiness frameworks in

each region. These program frameworks rely on local labor market data to identify careers that are expected to grow over the next 5 to 10 years. The program includes a prominent role for career assessment at the beginning of enrollment to ensure participants consider options that are the right fit.

College specialists and career specialists are involved with a participant from the start through post-graduation planning. This support begins with college tours in the eighth or ninth grade and continues through the college application process. Career specialists support students that may not be college bound and are looking for employment opportunities by focusing on middle-skill jobs.

The director of the Jobs Institute explains that they seek "at the very least, awareness and exposure to middle-skill jobs and opportunities and jobs within their communities, within their region. [We] help support their transition out of high school into . . . full-time employment for a young person that has decided not to go to college."

This dual focus on college and career is reinforced by Wegmans. Youth placed at Wegmans for employment who stay through graduation are eligible for college scholarships from the company.

## Access to Transportation

The HW-SC facilitates a number of student-supportive services, including transportation, which is a common barrier preventing low-income individuals

from obtaining available jobs. The program helps the participant identify how to get to work, including what the family can provide and what public transportation is available. The youth advocate may work with the employer to make sure that schedules can be aligned to available transportation. Where there are many employed students, such as Rochester, Syracuse, and Prince George's County, the HW-SC may pay for transportation directly.

This is especially true for Wegmans stores in the outlying suburbs that are not accessible by public transportation. A shuttle service carries HW-SC participants Friday afternoons through Sundays. As students near high school graduation, they discuss their plans for when the shuttle will no longer be available to them.

## Data-Driven Decision-Making

Data drives all aspects of the HW-SC's programming, with an expectation for continuous improvement. For example, the six risk factors that serve as a basis for eligibility were derived from research and determined by using predictive analytics. Graduation outcomes are used to assess program effectiveness and are verified by the school districts. A business intelligence team helps set annual performance goals with each region.

Monthly dashboards are prepared for the regional executive directors so that they may closely monitor performance on metrics such as the percent of students who are YETA certified and the

number of students employed by their partners. In addition, supervisors review the performance of individual youth advocates on a weekly basis to make sure that metrics such as student contact are met and no one falls through the cracks.

Wegmans staff also closely tracks their student employees. During the early years of the program, students were required to bring in copies of their report cards.

Now, there are districts where Wegmans staff have direct access to student records online and can proactively work with the HW-SC partners to make sure that students are on track.



## Uniform Standards for Employees

Wegmans emphasizes treating all employees equally—the student employees enrolled in the HW-SC are managed to the same standards as other employees. Kelly explains that, in the earlier years of the program, managers were reluctant to apply the company standards to the new group. “We just had to establish the point that number one, yes, these new people are coming into our organization. But number two, we cannot compromise our values in terms of expectations for these folks. . . . And I think the company responded to it well.”

Wegmans’ Armignacco notes that the student employees also respond well to this policy. “They’re no different than our other employees. I think that was key to getting them to be successful . . . that there’s the same level of standards and accountability. We do what we need to do for those students to be supported in order to be able to meet those standards, but everyone is accountable. You don’t get a pass just because you’re in a certain program.” This approach ensures that HW-SC participants are positioned for continued success at Wegmans, even after graduating from the program.

## Leadership Buy-In and Commitment

The HW-SC has flourished in a partnership with Wegmans in part because the company recognizes its value and continues to maintain a deep commitment to the program. Wegmans Chairman Daniel Wegman serves on the HW-SC board, and the company hires more participants than any other employer partner. This value is reinforced by the alignment of the HW-SC’s mission and Wegmans’ company priorities used for the evaluation of management personnel. The five corporate priorities are sales, contribution, diversity, development, and retention. The latter three are called “people measures” and the support of the HW-SC helps individual managers secure results that show they are supporting corporate priorities.

Beyond the opportunity to enter Wegmans through the HW-SC, program graduates can continue to thrive at Wegmans because of a shared focus on professional development. The HW-SC is one of numerous programs that the company partners with to help ensure that employees reach their career goals. Wegmans maintains a chart that shows the lateral and vertical opportunities that are possible, and employees are encouraged to use it to map out their careers. These opportunities are key at a company that promotes from within before looking externally. In fact, most employees rose through the ranks of the organization to their current positions.

## MOVING FORWARD WITH WORK-BASED LEARNING

The history of the HW-SC is marked by a recognition of the value that local youth can bring to the business, as well as what the career opportunity can do for them. The investment by Wegmans, and participation as an employer that offers mentors, scholarships, and other individualized supports, is critical to the success of participants.

This partnership has translated into a work-based learning program that opens doors to employment at Wegmans and then supports retention within a key employee demographic at the company. The value of the model is clear, as the HW-SC continues to expand to new cities and new employers.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

We asked our contacts at Wegmans for three pieces of advice that they would share with an employer considering starting a work-based learning program for young people. These were their thoughts:

### > **Look for meaningful work, not just busy work.**

There are often responsibilities of adult employees that can be shifted to youth in work-based learning programs. In many instances, this may be a young person's first job, so they

are also becoming accustomed to the work environment and being held accountable for things like punctuality and communication. They are learning about the culture of the organization and what it means to work in an organization.

### > **There is no need to compromise standards.**

Although the program may be focused on programs for disadvantaged populations, the participants must meet an organization's standards and guidelines.

### > **Don't be afraid to ask the young person how things are going.**

While the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection program has academic standards as a condition of employment, it is beneficial to engage participants regardless of whether that is a specific requirement. Participants will be more engaged if employees or managers express interest in how they are doing in school, and what their plans are—that there is concern not just about their work performance, but also their success.