

February 13, 2006

Investing in the Future

GSK Supports Online Tool that Helps Students Make
Informed Decisions About Their Futures

by Dorothy Brown

Here's a visualization exercise. Close your eyes. Think back to when you were 14, 16, 18 years old. When you were that age, did you know what you wanted to do for the rest of your life? Looking back, did you know a job like yours even existed? Think about your kids, your friends' kids, kids around the neighborhood. Do you think they know what they want to do with the rest of their lives? Do they seem to be making the choices that will set them on the right path . . . or any path?

Most kids haven't thought beyond graduating from high school. Some have vague notions about what they want to do, but don't have the knowledge or resources to develop a plan. A select few have very specific ideas about their career goals, have developed a plan with the help of parents or school guidance counselors, and have the resources to implement their plan.

If most kids between 7th and 12th grade don't know what they want to do with the rest of their lives, and don't have the knowledge or resources to find out what their options are, how will that impact America's future workforce? If nothing is done, today's students will not develop the skills, resources, knowledge, and experience they will need to meet the demands of the nation's workforce in an expanding global market.

Those are the very questions and concerns **Geoff Cramer**, founder of **Futures For Kids**, faced a few years ago. He volunteered as a wrestling coach at a local high school in Fayetteville, NC. Based on his experiences mentoring these students, he found out they had no idea what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. Their parents didn't have the experience or knowledge to help them. Their school guidance counselor, although very passionate about her work, was so overwhelmed that she didn't have time to help all the students develop career plans. This is not unusual. "Across the country, most students never have a one-on-one conversation with the guidance counselors to plan their career goals," says **Susan Milliken, Executive Director, Futures for Kids**.

About Futures for Kids

Futures for Kids (F4K) is an online tool that allows middle and high school students to take a quick assessment of their interests and aptitude, discover the areas that appeal to them, and explore a variety of careers. F4K provides a centralized resource for students to:

- learn about their strengths and interests
- link to information about career opportunities and review job postings
- communicate directly with career coaches to get a "real-life" perspective on jobs

- explore education and training pathways, internships, scholarships and grants.

Many students like to start with salary information, but they can also find education and training requirements for career choices, and find out more about the companies in their communities. They can connect with real people who are in the jobs that interest them—professionals who volunteer their time to talk with these students. Through a discussion board, students can ask questions and get advice. They have an opportunity to validate their career interests with the people who are in those fields. Or, based on what they find out, they may decide to look at a different career.

Founded in 2001, F4K's mission is to "bridge the gap between the hopes and dreams of our students and the workforce development needs of our communities." They have strong support from North Carolina's public school system. An educational leadership team—comprised of 20 top educators from across the state—provides guidance on how to build this program. A business steering committee—comprised of HR leaders from leading companies in the area—provides the community and business perspective necessary for this program to fulfill its mission. "This program is uniquely positioned to succeed because it doesn't seek to compete with or displace other resources," says **Steve Sons, Vice President, US HR Operations**, and who sits on F4K's business steering committee. "F4K draws on the public and private sectors, they look at how they can coordinate with all of the social services that are provided by the state and local communities."

What's in store for the future?

Later this spring the F4K website will feature short video clips of a GSK scientist and two pharmaceutical sales representatives. Students will get first-hand accounts as GSK employees talk about two different career paths, how they prepared themselves to get there, and what a company like GSK can offer.

Currently, F4K concentrates their efforts on helping students who don't know about the variety of careers that exist or how their individual interests and aptitudes can lead to a career. These students have limited perspectives on their own futures and have not been exposed to the wealth of opportunities available to them. These students could go on to provide the highly-skilled, competent labor pool required by GSK's vendors. The pharmaceutical market is more complex, however, and generally requires higher levels of education and preparation than service industries. Steve Sons supports these efforts and adds, "Eventually, I would like to see F4K expand their services to students who are college bound and give them an understanding of the market so they can prepare themselves by taking the right courses in high school and college." By encouraging local students to pursue the sciences and higher education, GSK will benefit more directly by decreasing their dependence on the foreign labor pool.

Currently, F4K is focusing their attention on North Carolina students. They hope to use their model as a springboard for other states.

How Can I Help?

If you want to make a difference in a young person's life, you can volunteer to be a career coach. Says Susan, "You could be a key resource for these kids—help them discover the options they have, show them how they can prepare themselves for their future, and perhaps save them some painful exploration." Career coaches must pass a sexual offender and 7-year background check. You can self-select the career you're in or have been in, then you'll host a discussion board on that particular career. It's not in real-time, so you're not committed to specific dates or times. You'll receive an email when a student posts a question to the discussion board. Then, at your own leisure, you can log-on to the discussion board and answer their questions. The average career coach spends just 10 – 15 minutes per week responding to students. Says Steve, "I think GSK employees would enjoy giving back to the community in this way." Visit www.f4k.org for more information.