

BUILDING A SKILLS ECONOMY

LESSONS LEARNED: RURAL CAPITAL AREA, TEXAS

*Drawing from over two decades in workforce development, **Paul Fletcher, CEO, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA)**, shares lessons learned for boards navigating similar experiences connecting employers, educators, and job seekers across diverse regions.*

01 **If Employers Don't Know You, You Can't Help Them**

At a board retreat, three out of four employer panelists said they didn't know who the workforce board was. That candid feedback became a turning point. The board hired a communications professional from the news media who built relationships with journalists, resulting in proactive media coverage on employment trends. The takeaway: invest in a dedicated communications role and meet employers where they already gather—chambers, industry events, and economic development meetings.

02 **Be the Air Traffic Controller, Not the Airline**

When Samsung announced a major semiconductor facility, every university and college in the region wanted to help. The board's value was not in delivering training directly, but in coordinating who does what, preventing duplication, and ensuring resources are strategically deployed. This "air traffic controller" model applies to any region where multiple institutions serve overlapping populations.

03 **Anchor Employers Are Awareness Catalysts**

Samsung and Tesla didn't need the workforce board's help to recruit their own employees. But their high-profile presence drew thousands of people into advanced manufacturing careers who had never considered the field. Boards

should leverage major employer announcements to expand awareness of entire industry sectors, not just the anchor company

04 Bring Training to People, Not People to Training

With residents living up to 90 miles from the nearest classroom, the board invested in online learning platforms and worked with local practitioners, such as a plumbing business owner teaching evening classes in his community, to deliver skilled trades training where people actually live. Rural boards should explore hybrid and hyper-local delivery models rather than expecting residents to commute to centralized campuses.

05 Diversify Funding Before You Have To

The board is building industry sector partnerships designed to become self-sustaining through employer dues and contributions. They also recruited a staff member from the Boston area with experience in employer-funded models. The lesson: don't wait for federal allocations to shrink, start building alternative revenue strategies now, and look to other regions for proven approaches.

06 Approach AI with Caution and Clear Boundaries

The board learned early to ask a critical question about any AI tool: "Are we the customer, or are we the product?" They adopted a closed-environment approach to keep sensitive workforce data from flowing into public large language models. Boards should establish clear AI use policies before adopting tools, not after.