



One Group's Vision for Student Success

2020 John H. Taylor Jr. Education Leadership Award Winners,
Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals, Ernie Dianastasis, and Gary Stockbridge

BY MATT AMIS

"THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE in Delaware that really have a passion for education," muses Gary Stockbridge, regional president of Delmarva and Atlantic City Electric. "And 80 percent of the stuff we all have a passion for, we all actually agree on."

"But so often today, people spend 90 percent of their time on the 10 percent of the stuff that they don't agree on—fighting. There is so much stuff we can work together on; let's focus on that and let's get stuff done."

Therein lies the ethos of The Vision Coalition of Delaware, a group that Stockbridge chairs, and one of the nation's most enduring public-private partnerships dedicated to improving public education on a state-wide level.

The longstanding coalition has given a space for business leaders like Stockbridge—or Ernie Dianastasis, CEO of The Precisionists, Inc., or Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals, the retired former board chair of WSFS Bank—

to work with district superintendents, state-level policymakers, grassroots advocates, nonprofit leaders, and more, for 16 years.

"The concept of trying to transform public education as a businessperson, what would be more important than talent acquisition and retention?," says Dianastasis. "From that perspective, what better way to help than with the farm system, our K-12?"

The Vision Coalition is tasked with helping Delaware create – and deliver on – aspirational, long-term blueprints for modernizing and improving the state's public education ecosystem, so that all children—not just those from well-off families—have a chance to succeed and grow into healthy, productive citizens.

They are the group responsible for Vision 2015, a ten-year plan released in 2005 that was hailed as one of the most comprehensive and coherent education plans in the nation. Vision 2015 focused on nearly

Superstars in Education

every aspect of public education to provide students with greater and fairer opportunities.

“My involvement began really out of a personal conviction to help people learn how to be able to function at the level of which they were capable,” Schoenhals says. “That they would have the opportunity to get an education that would maximize their potential...It doesn’t take you long to think about...the huge economic impact that that has on society.”

While Vision 2015 earned local and national acclaim, it also set Delaware up for a huge federal windfall. The planning and convening set Delaware up to have the highest scoring plan in the U.S. and to win \$119 million through the federal Race to the Top competition in 2009.

Delaware moved on more than 75 percent of the policy recommendations set forth in the Vision 2015 plan and held annual conferences each year to hold themselves accountable

As technology and modern approaches began making their way into classrooms, the coalition released Student Success 2025 in 2015 to help inform the priorities of the next decade.

Based on feedback from 4,000 Delawareans, Student Success 2025 acknowledges that, to truly succeed in the future, students will need more than just core academic knowledge. To tackle tomorrow’s problems and excel in the jobs of the future, students will need “soft” skills and attributes like creativity, flexibility, and curiosity.

The goal is for all Delaware students to thrive, accomplish more, and take advantage of expanded opportunities aligned with their unique skills, interests, and abilities. This includes providing support needed for all

How Have Our Public Schools Improved Over the Last Decade?

- **Early Learning has grown and improved:** 10,000 students enrolled in high quality early learning programs in 2018, a 49 percent increase.
- **More parents are choosing our public schools:** Over the last decade, parents of about 13,000 children have voted with their feet and moved back to our public schools
- **More high schoolers are graduating:** Since the establishment of a sound measure of high school graduation in 2013, we’ve seen a steady increase, up from 80 percent to 87 percent.
- **Delaware is a national leader in Career Pathways:** Starting with just 27 students six years ago, we now have 16,000 students engaged in meaningful work experiences, earning opportunities for industry credentials and early college credits.
- **More of our young people are ready for college and careers:** A big uptick in college credit attainment while still in high school (e.g. 44 percent increase in the number of high schoolers taking dual enrollment courses from SY 2016) and a 43 percent decrease in youth unemployment over the last eight years.



students to succeed, including students who are homeless, living in foster care, hungry, neglected, physically disabled, cognitively challenged, or learning English. Student Success 2025 has six key tenets:

- The state should prioritize investments in early learning.
- Schools should harness technology to personalize learning for students.
- College and workforce training should be more accessible after high school.
- The state’s funding system must be overhauled to be more efficient and fair.
- Educators should receive top-notch training and in-school support.
- Schools should work better together towards common goals.

This long-term vision is critical, but the future is here. The commitment of the business community is paying off. More of our young people are attending high quality early learning, coming back to our public schools, completing high school, and getting into college and careers (see side bar).

Back when Skip was the chair of the Vision Coalition, only about a third of our young people were in full-day kindergarten and there was no way of measuring quality across our early childhood providers. Today, all kids have access to full-day kindergarten and there is STARS, a statewide quality-rating system benefiting 10,000 of our youngest learners per year. This took steady, persistent advocacy over a decade.

Likewise, the business community played a lead role in helping catalyze the state’s effort to launch career pathways. By working in partnership with the state, higher education, our schools and non-profits, Delaware is now seen as a national leader in connecting our young people to a range of fast growing industries. The private sector’s willingness to invest early in this idea helped it grow from just 27 students in 2014 to what will be 20,000, or half of our high schoolers, next year. “A lot of it is happening now!,” says Dianastasis. “What a wonderful connection point between industry and the kids and schools. If we didn’t have that foundation and alignment laid with the Vision Coalition, it would’ve been a lot harder to get something started.”

The business community needs to continue to be at the table and lead. The hard work of building a world-class system of public schools takes more than any political cycle. These three leaders exemplify the commitment the First State needs to continue to grow and improve. ■