



## Florida Provides Strong Showing for Business

**A**long with its pro-business climate, innovative industries and focus on tomorrow's workforce talent, Florida's nationally lauded workforce system and highly-skilled workforce are major contributors to the state's emergence as a key global player.

StreetLinks Lender Solutions, provides an innovative suite of home valuation and lending-technology solutions, and knows firsthand the benefits of expanding their business in Florida. StreetLinks is one of the largest appraisal-management



*Steve Haslam, CEO, StreetLinks Lender Solutions at the company's new, 36,000 square-foot Tampa facility.*

providers in the country, with a network of 25,000 appraisers serving mortgage-lender clients nationwide.

"We knew we wanted to expand into a state with a strong focus on business climate and workforce development," said Steve Haslam, CEO, StreetLinks. "Florida has both of those attributes and a great governor who is committed to continuous improvement in those areas. And, of course, Florida has a large pool of great talent that possesses the basic skills we need to keep growing our company successfully."

Florida is setting the standard in developing talent and responding market needs across multiple industries using innovative platforms – from customized training grants that help businesses and their employees thrive to connecting students as young as middle-school age to industry-standard curricula and, often, industry certification.

Among the most successful initiatives is the state's Quick Response Training (QRT) grants program – a major factor in StreetLinks' Florida site selection – which next year celebrates 20 years of providing Florida businesses a custom training solution to maintain and increase competitiveness. Administered by the state's business-led workforce policy

board, Workforce Florida Inc., QRT has been cited by Florida economic developers as the No. 1 program with the largest impact on their ability to win multi-state contracts. QRT has proven so valuable that Florida lawmakers and Governor Rick Scott recently doubled the program's funding for the 2013-14 fiscal year to \$12 million.

"Our education and training programs are sustaining and strengthening the talent supply for our state's businesses. They are also luring businesses that increasingly choose Florida over other states," said Chris Hart IV, president and CEO of Workforce Florida. "Proven programs such as Quick Response Training grants are helping bolster Florida's top reputation for a winning, globally-competitive workforce."

After investing nearly \$2 million to open its 70,000-square-foot facility in Tampa, StreetLinks turned to the QRT program for training assistance and received a grant for nearly \$308,000 to train more than 240 employees with an average wage of \$19.63.

QRT grants are distributed to businesses in high-growth, high-demand targeted industries such as information technology, manufacturing, life sciences, and global logistics. The grants provide customized

training, through partial reimbursement, for new jobs created at new or expanding businesses. The business gets to decide what training is needed, who offers it and how. For the 2011-2012 fiscal year, Workforce Florida awarded QRT grants totaling nearly \$5.9 million to provide skills-upgrade training for nearly 4,900 full-time employees, 3,990 of whom were new hires. On average, trainees' wages increased by nearly 30 percent within a year of completing training supported by Florida's nationally recognized program.

The QRT program has been a significant contributing factor to recent national rankings speaking to the overall success of the workforce system:

- For five consecutive years, Florida has received a top workforce ranking in CNBC's annual America's Top States for Business report.
- *Chief Executive* magazine ranked Florida No. 2 in its most recent annual survey of the best states for business.
- In 2012, Florida was named No. 1 for Talent Pipeline in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Enterprising States report.
- In the 2013 Enterprising States report released April 29, Florida was ranked No. 1 for its infrastructure – with the report noting the state's strategic port investments to boost international trade and its support for business expansion in rural communities. Global logistics and trade are among the workforce system's targeted industries.

In addition to preparing the right talent for the right industries at the right time through customized training, the state is focused on ensuring K-12 education prepares students to offer immediate value to employers and to pursue advanced education immediately following high school. The 2013 Enterprising States report ranked Florida No. 1 in higher education efficiency, No. 4 in Advanced Placement test scores, and No. 9 in college affordability.

Florida's workforce system also supports programs in place to strengthen the state's talent pipeline, exposing K-12 students to career training and certifications as early as middle school. For example, Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Academies provide rigorous and relevant career-focused courses articulating to postsecondary-level coursework and lead to industry certification. Under the 2007 CAPE Act, each school district must have at least one high school CAPE Academy, established in partnership with business



*Sidney Lyght, a Florida eighth-grader with multiple Microsoft certifications gained through CAPE Academy curricula supported by Workforce Florida, talks about how he plans to use his credentials. Left to Right: First Lady Ann Scott, Governor Rick Scott, Griffin Middle School Principal Gwen Thomas, Sidney Lyght and mother Dorinda Lyght.*

and workforce development leaders in the community. In 2011, the CAPE Act was expanded to require plans for at least one CAPE Academy at the middle school level in each district. Today there are more than 1,550 CAPE Academies across Florida, enrolling more than 185,000 students.

Information technology-focused CAPE Academies have seen particular strides evidenced by the recent implementation of a technical-assistance project designed to connect middle school students to industry recognized IT curricula and certifications. Supported by Workforce Florida and implemented by The Whetstone Group, this initiative resulted in middle school teachers and students from 15 school districts earning more

than 800 industry certifications in the first semester of the 2012-2013 school year from industry leaders such as Microsoft® and Adobe®. The project currently is underway in an additional 10 Florida middle schools – each of which will receive more than \$30,000 of value in technical-assistance products and services for the establishment of a new CAPE Information Technology Career Academy. These career academies are anticipated to generate Science Technology Engineering & Math (STEM) training and digital literacy opportunities for middle school students, preparing them for more advanced certifications in high school and college.

In April, Governor Rick Scott signed new legislation to further align K-12 education with market needs by creating a pathway to a diploma for students going on to college or a career and providing access to industry certifications in more than 200 professions. Hailed by the business and education communities as preparing Florida students to provide immediate value to employers after high school or go on to higher education, the new law reinforces higher education advancements made in Florida, including all 28 state colleges accepting Governor Scott's provision of flexibility needed to provide bachelor's degrees for \$10,000 or less in tuition.

Florida's workforce system includes Workforce Florida, the Department of Economic Opportunity, 24 Regional Workforce Boards and nearly 100 One-Stop Career Centers. Workforce Florida's focus as the state's business-led policy board is addressing business talent needs through strategies and investments connecting job seekers with employment, training and education. **ES**

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