

Educators, local businesses meet for Whitley Works summit

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COLUMBIA CITY — Hard working, reliable, self-motivated and teachable — these are just some of the adjectives used by local business professionals and educators to describe their ideal worker.

Whitley County business professionals came together Wednesday for the Whitley Works Summit, organized by the three local school systems: Smith-Green, Whitley County Consolidated and Whitko schools.

The program Whitley Works was formed because the unemployment rate in Whitley County is about 3.5 percent according to Jon Myers, president of the Economic Development Corporation in Whitley County.

The goal of the summit was to find ways to help students better understand their options before they graduate high school. Whitley Works plans to create a certification for students that would show students developed skills businesses consider essential to being a good worker.

The summit was funded by a Lilly Endowment Grant. Smith-Green and Whitley County Consolidated applied for the grant together. Whitko applied for the same grant separately, but the decision was made to join with the other two schools.

Local employers are looking for workers with advanced math abilities and reading comprehension, said Rick Farrant, director of communications at Northeast Indiana Works.

The manufacturing sector is the largest employer in Whitley County, he added. Over the next decade, Whitley County manufacturing is expected to grow by 25 percent. Adding in all the other sectors with manufacturing, Whitley County has a lot of jobs to fill.

“Which means that in the next decade in northeast Indiana, we’re going to have to fill up to 104,290 positions,” Farrant said.

In nearly every field, employers need people with strong communication skills and employees need to be self-motivators, said Alisa Deck, director of education workforce cultivation at the Center of Excellence in Leadership and Learning.

Schools alone can’t accomplish this task of supplying local employers with the employees they need, said Patricia O’Connor, superintendent of Whitley County Consolidated Schools.

“We believe that when we lock arms for a common goal for our youth and the future of our county, this exciting and challenging initiative can absolutely be accomplished,” O’Connor said.

This summit was a large-scale brainstorming session for local businesses and educators on how to connect students with careers in the community. During the session, Deck created eight small groups. These groups were made up of community leaders, educators and business leaders; their goal, to lay out what makes a good worker. Braden Mullett, principal of Eagle Tech Academy, shared his group's thoughts about workers knowing their parts.

“This idea of knowing your role and accepting your role, not everybody gets all the glory, but we all win,” Mullett said. “Every part is important.”

The groups were then asked a much harder question: How to teach students these skills to prepare them for their future. The answers were similar from all the groups, but it was clear the room agreed students need to learn about business opportunities in their community earlier.

“I think what we're seeing, what we see in schools, is if they don't know they don't go,” Mullett said.

That's why bringing the businesses presence to the school could be a big benefit to helping kids learn about career opportunities in the area, Mullett said. Such an exchange would show kids that businesses want to invest in them. It was suggested that businesses could create a presentation to highlight what particular skills a career needed, what the pay was like and how much school was required.

Kevin Quickery, vice president and corporate services at Northeastern REMC, highlighted something he hears from students today: “‘What's in it for me?’ That's what kids want to know,” he said.

According to Deck, what's in it for the students is a cleaner path to a career that they really want. Not a four-year degree with which a student can hopefully find a job.

O'Connor closed out the summit by saying that if this community works together and can create a network of support, the Whitley Works program will be a success and allow the schools to enhance their curriculum to better assist students.

"It's not gonna be a one and done, that's not the way we do it here," O'Connor said. "I believe that if we get 200 letters of support and 200 stakeholders in this county that are willing, we will get the attention of the Lilly Endowment."

Anyone who wants to show support and wants to get involved can email Lori Heuer, talent development director at heuerla@wccsonline.com or by phone at (260) 244-5771.