

Seniors aim for state work-ethic certificate

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High school seniors in Columbus hope to have an advantage in the workforce by completing a program that ensures they have the skills and traits employers are seeking.

The Governor’s Work Ethic certificate program, overseen by the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, is available to all Bartholomew Consolidated School Corp. seniors and requires that students meet five competency areas, said Autumnne Streeval, integration specialist with the Columbus Area Career Connection.

The district was awarded \$35,000 in December to implement the program, which started in August, and was among 18 Indiana entities to receive funding as part of a pilot program.

“It’s really open to anyone, no matter what they plan to do,” Streeval said.

The five competencies that students are required to meet include demonstrating they can persevere through

challenges and problem-solve; are accepting and demonstrate service to others, possess a positive attitude and communicate clearly; are a self-starter and critical thinker; are reliable and demonstrate responsibility, in addition to being organized, punctual and can show self-management.

In addition, students must meet four objectives in demonstrating academic readiness with a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0 that includes being on track to meet all graduation requirements. Individuals must also have an attendance rate of at least 98 percent, one or fewer discipline referrals and complete a minimum of six hours of community service or volunteer work during the school year.

High school seniors who meet the five competency areas — which will require signatures from three school employees who can attest that students have met those skills — receive a work ethic certificate signed by Gov. Eric Holcomb and the DWD commissioner,

currently filled on an interim basis by Regina Ashley.

Participation in the program is voluntary. Currently, a combined 201 seniors from Columbus North, Columbus East and Columbus Signature Academy — New Tech high schools that are working toward earning a work ethic certificate, according to data provided by the district. That represents about 22 percent of the 925 seniors attending the three BCSC high schools, which have a combined 925 seniors.

If students fail to meet the requirements in any area, they are automatically disqualified from earning the certificate, Streeval said. However, those who are successful will have different incentives available to them such as scholarship opportunities, guaranteed job interviews and possible tuition reimbursement.

“It is an exciting opportunity that highlights the powerful relationship between

schools, community members and the business sector," Streeval said. "By retaining our students locally, no matter what their post-secondary path may be, will be nothing but an economic gain for our community."

BCSC students in Grades 6 and 8 will also have an opportunity to earn a work ethic certificate.

Sixth-graders who complete the requirements will earn a certificate signed by Mayor Jim Lienhoop, while eighth-graders will earn the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce work ethic certificate signed by chamber president Cindy Frey.

Students in those two grade levels must meet all of the competency areas and objectives with the exception of the 2.0 GPA requirement, Streeval said.

Students tout possible benefits

Kendra Pastrick, a senior at Columbus East, is among the 79 individuals at her school pursuing the certificate. She plans to major in mechanical engineering in college. Pastrick said she believes

having the work ethic certificate will give her an edge in the workforce over other potential job applicants.

Columbus North senior Hussain Saifuddin, who plans to study biomedical engineering in college, is also working toward earning his certificate. Saifuddin said although he's not sure where he will land a job, Faurecia is one possibility.

He worked at the Columbus manufacturer as an intern last summer and said having the work ethic certificate could be another way to get his foot in the door with the company.

"I would love to work there," Saifuddin said.

Streeval said earning the certificate is a rigorous process and noted the work ethic skills are already woven into classes through student work and projects. Participants practice the skills as part of the district's focus on the qualities of an expert learner, she said.

"Students already reflect on how they are demonstrating the qualities of an expert learner so these work

ethic skills are familiar to the students," Streeval said.

She noted the 98 percent attendance rate requirement — no more than three absences — is a high standard, but one that employers and community members agreed is reflective of the expectation beyond high school, whether that involves the workplace, higher education or the military.

Steven Combs, chancellor of Ivy Tech Community College's Columbus campus, also said the work ethic certificate is an advantageous step to show potential employers that Columbus high school graduates are building desirable skills necessary they they join the workforce.

"In the short term, students will develop a strong sense of what is expected in college and their careers, such as the importance of being a present and positive performer, as well as gain the benefits of completing community service and exploring career opportunities," Combs said.

Combs also said as the state's engine for

workforce alignment, Ivy Tech prepares a pipeline to meet workforce demand.

“Our academic programs provide pathways to highly rewarding, high-demand careers, and our services such as Career Development offer students the chance to sharpen their professional skills to be work-ready,” Combs said.

Impact on local employers

Frey also serves on the work ethic certificate advisory board, made up of about 45 members from the manufacturing, education, business and non-profit sectors. The work ethic certificate will be helpful for students who complete the requirements, while companies also stand to benefit if they choose to hire an individual who has a certificate, Frey said.

“When we talk with employers, their number one-concern is workforce,” Frey said.

“Workers know it’s important to show up, they have high attendance, they can communicate clearly and can work in a team.”

Some employees and job candidates don’t demonstrate those skills today, however, local employers have said.

Barry Parkhurst, vice president of administration at NTN Driveshaft, said the biggest issue facing his company is workers not being able to meet attendance requirements. The work ethic certificate would be another way to determine whether an applicant is a good fit at NTN Driveshaft, he said.

Having a strong work ethic and being able to work with others are key traits people need to have in all types of jobs, said Parkhurst, who also serves on the advisory board.

“It gives us another (screening) tool when we’re interviewing

somebody,” Parkhurst said.

Frey said she believes the certificate program will elevate the quality of workers in different fields.

Combs also said any opportunity for students to prepare themselves for their future is a benefit to both educational institutions and employers, adding that students who prepare for college and careers while in high school greatly improve their rate of success.

The certificate, which Combs said has been vetted by Indiana employers, community-based organizations and post-secondary education institutions, will set Indiana high school graduates apart from other job candidates.

“This has been another amazing community collaboration between education and our employer partners,” Combs said.