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Work ethic takes PRIDE in Elkhart County

High school certificate program could aid employers in hiring

By Marshall V. King | Mar 27, 2017

ELKHART — John Place, president of Ancon Construction, is already promising higher wages for students who earn a new certification that hasn't even been implemented yet.

Having help from school systems to determine how good an employee a student may be is worth time and money to him. His company spends a lot of both trying to find employees and then having them not show up for work. Place said he's willing to pay \$1 more per hour to a student earning the Governor's Work Ethic Certificate that's in the works for all Elkhart County seniors.

"If they had that certification and I had some assurances they are good quality people and we eliminate that wasted time, it's worth it to me," he said.

The certificate shows a student did a list of things exemplifying persistence, respectfulness, initiative, dependability and efficiency,

words that make the acronym PRIDE.

Nearly every conversation between employers and schools raises how businesses don't just need smart people, they need ones who know how to be good employees, said Levon Johnson, supervisor of corporate and community partnerships for Elkhart Community Schools.

A guidance counselor in one of the conversations had heard of a program in southern Indiana that offered a certification. Research showed there was one in Clarke County and one in the Fort Wayne region. As conversations in Elkhart County started happening, Indiana Department of Workforce Development grants became available to help pay for launching a certification here. Elkhart Community Schools applied. So did Baugo and Fairfield together. Officials from the schools agreed to work together no matter what happened with funding. Both grants were

funded, bringing more than \$50,000 to the joint effort, Johnson said.

Horizon Education Alliance's Dorothy Shirk and Jason Harrison helped schools work together. Goshen soon joined the council that formed to launch the certification. Other schools in the county are exploring the option.

"I've been shocked how quickly it's come together," said Johnson, noting that the collaboration has been unbelievable.

"Businesses are speed boats and school systems are cruise liners, so we turn a little bit slower sometimes," he said. This time, he felt like he was driving one of the speed boats.

Brian Wiebe, executive director of Horizon Education Alliance, said that because of how school systems and business started working together, hitting the gas on initiatives is now possible. "Over four years, we have built

capacity for how to work together,” Wiebe said.

A meeting recently gathered folks from the local chambers, Elkhart County Economic Development Corp., Horizon Education Alliance, Elkhart Area Career Center and WorkOne — all of whom offered to help schools enlist the help of businesses.

The new certification will be implementing the certification and associated programs in the 2017-18 school year. To earn one means completing 10 components and agreeing to random drug tests.

For a student to earn a certification, he or she must attend school 98 percent of the time, have an internship, do community service, have one or less disciplinary referral per year, and tour at least one business. There’s also a random drug test, though one failure doesn’t mean the student can’t get the certification, but that the school and community can

intervene and offer a second chance, said Johnson. A significant number of people aren’t passing drug tests in the workplace or avoid potential employers that conduct them, he said.

There’s work ahead to make the certifications possible. School boards will have to change policies. Details will have to be ironed out.

In an age of testing and changing family structures, this new program has the potential to help Elkhart County and its employers as much as any in a long time. Whether you call them life skills, habits of highly effective people or markers of success, teaching them to students and creating a measure employers isn’t just teaching for a test, it’s creating a future workforce.

I’ve heard employers complain that kids don’t know how to work anymore. Having a certification like this, with educators helping students work on the

practical ways they become better citizens and employees, is both common sense and long overdue.

Having the marketplace and the classroom meet over something like this is just smart, not to mention the way that nine local high schools are all trying to do the same thing together.

Businesses will be coming into schools. Having pride in your work. The importance of showing up. These things matter to a community.

Not everyone will get this certificate, but the mere presence of it should make the entire community stronger because of how the training and interactions will change what we’re doing to raise future employees.

“The amazing thing is,” Johnson said, “even if a kid doesn’t sign up for work ethic certification, they’re still going to get touched by this.”