

Program/Initiative Title: Welding Career Pathways
WDA Name: Southwest Private Industry Council

Overview describing the innovative practice

Thirteen (13) students from the Minnesota Valley Area Learning Center had the opportunity to take a Welding Class at MN West Granite Falls during spring 2017 as part of their education training plan. The demographics of the students participating included: Hispanic/Latino - 6; American Indian - 1; and White - 6. Students earned 6 college credits and they gained the technical skills needed to obtain employment in the high-demand field of welding. The class was sponsored by SW MN Private Industry Council, Adult Basic Education, MN West Community and Technical College and the MN Valley ALC. The students attended welding class two - three days a week and also continued their regular classes at the MN Valley ALC. Included as part of the class were visits to several local businesses, employability skills, instruction in technical reading and welding math and opportunities to explore other mechanical trades. The students also visited AGCO Headquarters in Jackson and the educational programs at MN West Jackson. Several of the graduating students will be continuing their education in welding or similar occupations at various post-secondary institutions including MN West, Ridgewater, and St. Cloud Tech. Others will be using their skills on the job or finishing high school at the ALC.

Jobseeker impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for jobseekers)

During the 2016-17 school year the students had a variety of opportunities to explore and research possible careers. They visited colleges, and heard from speakers from both public and private post-secondary institutions. The students were also provided an opportunity to learn new job skills as well as improve upon their existing job skills. Students gained insight into various careers through tours of businesses and production facilities and by having the ability to listen to representatives from a variety of local employers. The field trips, speakers and career exploration activities provided students with information and motivation to pursue education and training past high school. Topics discussed by local employers included communication, interpersonal skills, proper attire, having a positive attitude, dependability, work place etiquette and necessary academic skills. One of the barriers to employment and enrollment in post-secondary are the various necessary assessments and proper identification. Many of the students were able to obtain the proper identification, register for college, and complete the appropriate assessments to secure employment and/or become enrolled in college. Some of the events were designed for a few interested students while other events included entire area learning centers. Students' specific interests were catered to while also introducing students to a wide variety of career options. The experiences helped solidify choices for older students while giving younger students the opportunity to explore career choices.

As the student's progress along their career path, PIC youth staff provide post-secondary information sessions, to help identify post-training career options for optimizing skill achievement and continued career advancement. Staff assist in navigating the postsecondary system and provide career counseling to enhance the participants' opportunity for successful transition into the post-secondary environment. Ongoing support is a vital component for participants. Many are entering the workforce for the first time, some have had unsuccessful attempts at jobs, others may be reaching beyond what they have ever considered possible for themselves before. As part of the regions outreach to schools initiative, the SW MN PIC youth team is available on an ongoing basis to provide a connection, encouragement, and/or to serve as a general resource about all things career-related.

Employer/Community impact (ie: benefits, outcomes for non-jobseekers)

Employers in the region are challenged to recruit and hire employees with the skills needed for even entry-level employment. Without much new growth (or projected future growth) in the labor force, retraining the current workforce, and providing training to those who aspire to enter the workforce, becomes critical. In addition to the labor market data showing low unemployment rates and high job vacancy rates, partners continually hear from employers about difficulties in finding workers.

There is an expressed need throughout each industry for the increasing demand for skilled labor with the ability to advance along the employer or industry career pathway, resulting in rewarding and successful career opportunities.

These needs were confirmed with over 145 community stakeholders gathered at two regional planning events to identify and prioritize current workforce issues. Priorities identified by stakeholders included the need to: 1) *expand career exploration for students and share LMI with parents and teachers*; 2) *strengthen collaborations between businesses and high schools to increase work-based learning opportunities*; and 3) *address the unique needs of students of color that will lead to higher graduation rates and stronger employment outcomes*. These services have provided our workforce development area to address employment disparities of a significant and growing population of youth of color, the urgent and stifling shortage of skilled workers, and the overall needs of communities.

Identification of those involved, including collaborators

The class was sponsored by SW MN Private Industry Council, Adult Basic Education, MN West Community and Technical College and the MN Valley Alternative Learning Center. Business engagement included tours at J&D Construction, Friendship Homes and Spec System. The employer panel consisted of Sara Meyer, HR Manager for J&D Construction and Jamie Winters, Quality Control Manager at Friendship Homes. At J&D Construction in Montevideo, the students had the opportunity to tour the office and welding shop and met with three welders, the HR manager and the owner to hear about welding careers and ask questions. At the Friendship Homes facility in Montevideo the students were able to see a home being built from beginning to end. Friendship Homes has a unique advantage compared to other companies because their home construction is done indoors under controlled temperatures. The students learned first-hand what it would be like to work as a welder for the company when they visited the welding shop and saw the various welds and materials used. At Spec Systems in Granite Falls the students were introduced to a variety of projects and inspected welding blueprints they would need to follow if employed there. An employer panel was held at the Montevideo Workforce Center. The students welding instructor Dennis from Minnesota West offered great insight for the students and asked specific questions of the employers. The students also found out about summer employment opportunities and full time job openings after they complete high school.

Leveraging/alignment of outside resources

The welding class provided to the MN Valley Alternative Learning Center student was a result of the local Youth/Adult Partnership. The project was possible due to funds leveraged and aligned through various funding sources administered by MN West, PIC Youth and Adult funds (Youth Competitive Funding, Youth Intervention Prevention, Minnesota Youth Program), MN West (TAACCCT AMP, and Customized Training Pilot Program MN West CTC), MN Valley ALC, and local employers.

Ideas for replication/lessons learned

The partnerships will continue to be expanded upon as a result of the positive youth/adult Career Pathway partnership success. Other areas can easily replicate, by developing a strong partnership between the key stakeholders. Financial contributions, leveraging of funds and commitment and alignment from all partners is key to success.