

Community Connections

EcO15 Drives Education, Skill Development

By Charlee Beasor

Three years ago, a group of concerned residents in southeastern Indiana knew they were facing a shortage of skilled workers.

There were jobs to fill in Greensburg's new Honda plant and an expanding Cummins' facility in Columbus – about 6,000 positions in advanced manufacturing alone that needed workers of a certain education and expertise.

"If you looked at the sheer number of people in the workforce at the time – knowing what we knew then – we knew there wouldn't be the number of people educated and able to go into those roles," recalls John Burnett, president and CEO of the Community Education Coalition (CEC) in Columbus.

The CEC and The Heritage Fund (The Community Foundation of Bartholomew County) had been working to apply some educational initiatives in the area, but it wasn't until the groups connected with the Lilly Endowment on a grant proposal that they came up with Economic Opportunities through Education by 2015 (EcO15).

By December 2007, the Endowment had awarded a \$38 million grant to put the initiative into action.

EcO15 was implemented across a 10-county region: Bartholomew, Dearborn, Decatur, Franklin, Jackson, Jefferson, Jennings, Ripley, Ohio and Switzerland. Each received funds to hire a county coordinator to start the program.

A student works on a manufacturing component as part of the Dream It. Do It. campaign.



Three industries – one initiative

In the region, advanced manufacturing accounts for more than 25% of the employment sector. Health care makes up more than 10% of the workforce, and the hospitality and tourism industry is included as well, as revenue from gaming has helped spur a need for service employees.

"There are three goals. One is to help everyone move up at least one level; focus on advancement for the three industries; and thirdly to assist the community foundations in their endeavor to become a catalyst for change in their respective counties," Burnett adds.

The group originally had until December 2010 to implement the program and spend the \$38 million. When the economy began to drop, Burnett

says leaders wanted to ensure the funds were being spent wisely. A one-year extension has since been requested and received.

Almost half the grant – \$15 million – was utilized to construct an advanced manufacturing center in Columbus that is scheduled to be finished in 2011. Bob Abrams, EcO15 project manager of the Network for the Advancement of Manufacturing Excellence, wants the center to act as an agent and support mechanism for regional manufacturers and students.

"For generations, people were able to move right from high school to very good manufacturing jobs that provided them with security and very good incomes. Unfortunately, those days are over," Abrams notes. "The workforce here ... is going to have to become a more skilled and stronger workforce."

Another \$3 million went to construct health care simulation labs, which enable students and health care professionals to use specialized mannequins.

"We brought in some Ivy Tech students to do one of our simulations and one of the

students was so good that a person in the health care group said, 'I would hire you today if I had an opening.' Three weeks later, she did," remarks EcO15 Healthcare Coordinator Jim Battin. "That's the kind of thing that will happen more frequently. Businesses are learning this is their future recruiting pool."

Leading the way

Count Mike Effing as one of those business owners prepared to hire from this group.

Effing, CEO of Double E Enterprise in Osgood, recently assisted a group of students from Jac-Cen-Del High School with a class project. The students are part of Project Lead The Way, which partners with schools and prepares students to become leaders in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

The students used STEM learning to build a car with the highest possible miles per gallon and compete against other schools from across the state earlier this year.

When the school's "Jet Black Cadillac" encountered a design flaw at the last minute, Effing stepped in. The students went on to win "Best Integration of Math, Science, and Technology" at a competition.

"I would have given anything at that age (to have this program)," Effing observes. "The more trained people we have locally, the easier it's going to be to find somebody. If they come off the street and don't have a college education but had CAD (computer-aided design) in school, perfect."

The Project Lead The Way program has gone from only eight high schools in the area to every high school since EcO15 started.

"In Ripley County, a high school counselor went out and raised \$70,000 in one month on his own to start the program. The kids had already signed up for fall semester and they had something like 80 students go back and change their

schedules," Battin offers. "We are connecting with what students want; they are the customer of this. We've hit the mark on this one."

Math does matter

One of the most successful programs supported by EcO15 is Math Matters, which emphasizes project-based learning in the classroom.

It wasn't long ago that Trisha Burns and April Isom were struggling to get their eighth-grade students at Madison Jr. High School to understand how math connects to the "real world."

"We knew the kids weren't really engaged," Isom admits.

The pair had been teaching math standards in the typical way: starting at the front of the textbook and moving chapter-by-chapter to the end. Prior to starting school in the fall of 2009, they heard about Math Matters. Isom says that from the first introductory meeting, they realized they could make it work in their classrooms.

The teachers chose projects their students were to complete by using math lessons throughout the book. Isom had her students work on the plans for a "splash pad" for the local swimming pool. Now, the class will give its presentation to the mayor and parks department director.

During the last year, students did the amount of work equivalent to going through the math book twice. Burns says the 200 students involved in the program saw their preliminary ISTEP scores improve by 18% from the previous year's eighth-grade class and 16% from their scores as seventh graders.

Burnett cites these examples as proof that emphasizing education in the area will lead to better opportunities for everyone.

"Education is the driver," he notes. "It's what we've been working on in this community for a long time. In order for our economy to be successful, you need to invest in the people."

Students and adults across the southeastern region of the state gain experience in advanced manufacturing, health care and hospitality.





The Jac-Cen-Del High School student team shows off its “Jet Black Cadillac,” built with the cooperation of Project Lead the Way and Eco15.

“A lot of people who’ve been laid off – in manufacturing in particular – don’t have the knowledge or skills to go out and get employment elsewhere. It’s a real struggle across the country about how do you balance that need to support a family with the need to learn,” he explains. “We just haven’t captured the imagination yet on how to do that. I have yet to see around the country too many examples of communities being able to do that. I don’t know the answer.”

Focus on sustainability

While there are challenges to be faced, the Eco15 team hopes that by having county coordinators drive the initiatives in their own communities, those issues can be solved and the program will extend into the future.

“At the highest level, it’s what we envisioned,” Burnett affirms. “The main things that we have been focused on are the development of the education pathways and the involvement of communities. What we have done in each county is created a countywide steering committee that is responsible for developing a plan for investment of funding into the development of career pathways.”

Burnett says one of the most immediate things the Eco15 team did was look at how to carry on once the grant money dried up.

“We started looking at ways that the investments that were made would be investments that the education institutions would then take over long term,” he recalls.

Though there are some markers of success already showing up, such as high school graduation rates increasing from 79% to 84% and postsecondary enrollments climbing, it will take time to observe the full impact of Eco15. That’s why the year 2015 was attached to the initiative.

“From a systemic point of view, when trying to make changes in an economy, it’s going to take somewhere in the neighborhood of seven or eight years,” Burnett contends.

Already, the group behind Eco15 knows that what it’s doing will impact the region in a big way. Though the economy slumped in the middle of the initiative, Battin says the area will be poised to take advantage.

“The key thing right now is that we don’t have the jobs yet. What we have tried to take advantage of is to build the qualified labor pool,” he states. “Ultimately, we’ll be able to market this region in that way. This (economic situation) will ultimately pass and when it does, we’ll be ultimately positioned to have more qualified people in jobs. That is a big driver of all of this.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: John Burnett, Community Education Coalition and Eco15; Jim Battin, Stephanie Weber and Bob Abrams, Eco15, at www.eco15.org

Mike Effing, Double E Enterprises, Inc., at www.doubleeenterpriseinc.com

April Isom and Trisha Burns, Madison Jr. High School, at www.madison.k12.in.us