

Business and educational leaders unite to rebuild career and technical education

By Kyle Klausing, Granite Falls Advocate Tribune

Posted Mar 8, 2018 at 8:15 AM

A remarkable collection of business, civic, and educational leaders assembled on Thursday, March 1 at the Minnesota West campus in Granite Falls for the inaugural pilot meeting of the Manufacturing/Engineering Advisory group.

Launch Your Future Today (LYFT), a rural career and technical education pathway initiative created by the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative (SWWC), organized the meeting. The group met to discuss the status and future direction of career and technical education (CTE) in southwestern and west central Minnesota.

Participating businesses included Fagen Industries, K&M Manufacturing, Specialty Manufacturing Company, Chandler Industries, RITALKA Inc, Granite Falls Energy, and AMETEK. School officials from YME, Montevideo, MACCRAY, Renville, and Lakeview. City officials from Granite Falls also attended, in addition to several regional civic organizations such as the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council based out of Marshall.

LYFT works to create new CTE pathways to help students connect with educational opportunities that will allow them to enter an in-demand occupation in the region. After several failed attempts at jump starting the program, the SWWC and its partners were able to secure a \$3 million state legislative grant to develop a rural CTE delivery

system for high school students that involved multiple schools partnering with one another.

“What we’re trying to do is rebuild career and technical education,” said Tom Hoff, Career and Technical Project Coordinator with SWWC. He explained that demand for skills in engineering, manufacturing, and healthcare will only continue to increase in the future. At the same time, CTE classes, students, teachers, and funding have all been in decline, making the need for a new approach all the more pressing.

Local demographic also trends also predict problems on the horizon. The labor force is aging faster than young people are entering skilled trades, creating labor shortages. There is also a higher percentage of people with only a high school diploma when compared to the rest of the state. Wages also tend to be lower.

Last year, LYFT introduced its first pilot CTE pilot course, Introduction to Medical Careers. The decision to begin with medical training stemmed from a student survey that assessed and ranked interest in particular fields. Local high school students took the course at Minnesota West. Class was held three days a week and attracted students from 5 different schools.

According to Dawn Regnier, Dean of Career & Workplace Solutions at Minnesota West, the class was very successful and received positive feedback from students. Building off this success, local partners quickly worked on expanding class offerings for manufacturing and engineering.

LYFT leaders, however, quickly realized that they didn’t know exactly which skills to build classes around. “Instead of guessing what industry and manufacturing wanted, we decided to bring them together and ask,” said Hoff. The new advisory group will facilitate conversations between the various partners, and will eventually play a hand in molding future courses.

The conversation last week prompted many ideas. Alternative energy, digital electronics, and welding were all highlighted as areas of

particular interest. Participants said they hoped to see more opportunities for job shadowing, mentoring, and internships, in addition to more collaboration between local businesses and high schools. A common theme throughout the meeting was using CTE to incentivize young people to stay in the region while also giving a boost to the local economy.

Participants also said that students needed to gain more direct exposure to the job opportunities in the area. One way of doing this was introducing them to local businesses and providing them with opportunities to tour plants or speak with other skilled employees. “Need to make it real for the students” was one suggestion during the final group conversation portion of the meeting.

The difference between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills was another area of interest during the meeting. Although CTE mainly deals with teaching students the hard skills that they require to succeed, participants also stressed that it was important for students to develop soft skills like communication, attendance, and time management.

Hoff and other organizers are excited by the enthusiasm they saw from the participants. “We’ve all been part of meetings with good ideas but then fizzle,” he said. “We’re committed to moving this along, and we have momentum.” The advisory group will meet again later next month to pick-up where they left off.