

Chancellor praises technical education collaboration

By Linda Vanderwerf on Oct 10, 2018
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GRANITE FALLS — A growing collaboration in southwestern and west central Minnesota providing technical training to high school students won praise from the chancellor of the Minnesota State public college system.

Devinder Malhotra listened to an overview of the effort, called Launch Your Future Today, Wednesday morning at Minnesota West Community and Technical College in Granite Falls.

SWWC Service Cooperative received \$3 million from the 2017 Legislature to expand cooperation with businesses, nonprofit organizations and high schools. The plan is to expand career and technical education opportunities for high school students in the hopes they will stay in their home areas to study and work.

The Legislature required the plan have at least one business and two school districts on board to receive funding. It's moved far beyond that already. Five schools are currently involved, and more are likely to come on board.

The goal is to provide access to help students gain marketable skills and explore career possibilities.

Educators told Malhotra that they are trying to provide opportunities for students and show them the careers that are available for them in their home areas.

Business representatives said they need skilled employees, and it's to their benefit to work with a program that brings the high school students to their businesses.

Students said they have been happy to be earning college credits and getting a taste of the careers they would like to pursue.

SWWC, which serves school districts in 18 counties, is another partner. Participation is open to all co-op members.

The variety of organizations involved stay in touch through regular conference calls and have avoided turf battles by focusing on the needs of students.

"Thank you for sharing this project with me," Malhotra said. "It's really lifted my spirits."

Projects like LYFT are happening across the state, he said, "but this wide range of partnership I've seen here is very, very rare and very, very special."

Malhotra said he has been touring the state to learn about innovative workforce and career development partnerships.

Minnesota State is a network of 30 two-year colleges and seven universities and is a diverse system.

Malhotra ticked off some statistics: Of the 250,000 students, nearly 84,000 are from low-income families, nearly 50,000 are first-generation college students, and nearly 60,000 are from communities of color or native origin. Another 10,000 students are veterans.

Programs like LYFT offer ways to reach a variety of students and let them and their families know about education and career opportunities, he said.

Last school year, Minnesota State graduated 38,000 students, about 19,000 from career and technical programs, "but yet, as I drive around, I still see help wanted signs," he said.

Current labor shortages and those likely in the coming years are "enormous," he said. "We need to do more."

Colleges can't teach students all they will need to know, because the job market is constantly changing, Malhotra said. "Almost 35 to 40 percent of the jobs in the foreseeable future are yet to emerge," and many jobs that exist today weren't around 15 years ago.

The system needs to work with families and students to keep them informed of changes coming, and to work with communities to deal with workforce and education needs.

Colleges will need to be leaders in guiding communities through coming changes.

"We don't want to be just located in your communities," he said. "We want to be for you, and we want to belong to you; we want to be of you."

