

# SLICE OF LIFE

## Partnerships Prepare Students for College, Careers

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Denise Sudol, owner of the Dragonfly Gift Gallery in downtown Spencer, exudes enthusiasm. It's evident when she describes the community's economic efforts and the teenagers she has the pleasure to mentor in her shop that the two passions are intertwined.

"Owen County is an extremely poor county," she remarks. "Everything we do and everything we get has to be stretched. But there's this neat fiber of community – private, business and educational – that comes together for the same purpose. A lot is getting done. We're really maximizing our potential to succeed."

"The (Evan Bayh) 21st Century Scholars program plays into that because it gives (students) who might not otherwise be on track for college or for careers a chance to succeed."

Administered by the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE), 21st Century Scholars provides students from low-income families in communities across the state with up to four years of undergraduate tuition assistance at an eligible Indiana college or university.

Beginning with the class of 2017, participants must verify completion of the Scholar Success Program using their online ScholarTrack account. It includes 12 mandatory high school activities (three per grade level). In addition, the minimum accepted grade point average increased from 2.0 to 2.5 on a 4.0 scale.

"CHE began seeing the need for 21st Century Scholars to have a more structured college and career preparation process in high school to successfully navigate their first semester of college and move toward

degree completion," explains Shelley Huffman, director of college and career readiness for the Indiana Chamber.

Many communities, especially rural, are banding together to support their students in completing their Scholar Success activities (see chart on page 45).

"School counseling isn't one person's responsibility; it's a community's responsibility," Huffman asserts. "Today's students need more than an appointment with the school counselor once a year. The Scholar Success Program is structured to involve counselors. It involves businesses. And it involves parents. Students have a higher likelihood of success when parents are engaged and the community provides collective support."

As of February 2017, there were 16,599 scholars across the state, with 85% having ScholarTrack accounts and 35% on track to meet the new requirements.

Financial and geographic barriers pose additional challenges at rural schools. Taylor High School in Howard County and Owen Valley High School in Spencer are among those striving to assist their students in fulfilling the Scholar Success requirements and their own potential.

### 'Students take pride in it'

Southeast of Kokomo stands Taylor High School, which shares a facility with its middle school.

The high school, which enrolls approximately 400 students, has 29 scholars in the graduating class of 2017. All are on track to earn their scholarships. The success rate in each of the 12 required Scholar Success categories is 100%.

Principal Eric Hartman attributes the numbers to a phenomenal



Taylor High School partners with Community Howard Regional Health and other businesses to help 21st Century Scholars explore potential careers. Michelle Nicholson, a physical therapist, encourages student Liam Ireland to take a hands-on role with his internship.

job that staff, business partners, students and others have done with building relationships.

“Communication and information. It’s part of the culture here and has been for a long time,” he contends. “Students take pride in the program. We couldn’t have the rate of success we have without good kids and kids doing what they’re supposed to be doing.”

The counseling team meets with teens individually and as a group to answer questions and help map out their futures.

“We meet with the scholars by grade level at least four times per grade level within the year. We keep a chart of student progress as far as them completing ScholarTrack,” shares counselor Heather Baltz.

Assistance could be as simple as watching videos about paying for and succeeding in college to connecting them with internships.

Kathleen McKinney, recruitment consultant in human resources at Community Howard Regional Health, delights in seeing kids explore their interests. Taylor internships span 70 hours of workplace experience.

“We’ve probably had 15 to 18 Taylor High School students come through. We’ve had several in physical therapy and athletic training. It’s so valuable with the expense of college being what it is that they actually see what a day in the life is like.

“We’re hoping they have a great experience and have warm memories of their time with us. Some have continued the relationship (with us) and gone on to become volunteers.”

Back at Taylor, Baltz credits another crucial partner: parents.

“We have meetings in the evenings for any parents, but set aside a specific time for (21st Century) Scholars, especially when it comes time for filling the FAFSA out. Because we’re a small school, some of our parents are more comfortable coming to a place where they already have a personal relationship to get the help they need,” she confides. “It could just be a small question, but the comfort level of feeling like they have somebody they can go to is important.”

Students, however, are eventually held accountable.

“We do as much as we can in preparing them and completing all the steps,” she comments, “but ultimately, their grades and success ride on them.”

### ‘We’re flagging them early’

Start early and communicate often is a powerful philosophy at Owen Valley High School.

Counselor Bonnie Richmond says the goal is to “meet with students as much as possible to make sure they’re able to complete those different boxes (on the Scholar Success checklist).”

The high school boasts four innovative career academies: HELPS (Humanities, Education, Law, Protective Services); LIFE Science; PAVAC (Communications, Theater/ Visual/Musical Arts); and STEM.

“When we do their career assessments, students pick their academies,” Richmond notes. “They’ll meet with those three or four academy teachers once a month. And once within that month, they’ll have a workshop forum and guest speakers.”

Last fall, the high school recruited a career and graduation coach.

“He works with kids who are at risk for graduation. He can pull them into his office and make them sit down and get their work done. He’s got maybe 10 consistently down there. It’s something we were able to do through

go to a four-year school. They may choose to go to a technical school or directly into the workforce and it (maintaining ScholarTrack data) becomes less of a priority for them.”

The Indiana Chamber Foundation is providing college and career readiness technical assistance to Spencer-Owen Community Schools (and working with 14 additional districts throughout the state) through the Lilly Endowment Comprehensive Counseling Initiative. It will introduce a platform this year targeted to connect scholars with professionals in career fields they’re most interested in pursuing.

### ‘School of hard knocks’

Sudol, who spent 20 years as a stand-up comedian, interjects energy and humor into

The **Scholar Success Program** includes required activities that will help students stay on track for college and career success.

GRADE	REQUIRED ACTIVITIES		
9	Create a Graduation Plan	Participate in an Extracurricular or Service Activity	Watch “Paying for College 101”
10	Take a Career Interests Assessment	Get Workplace Experience	Estimate the Costs of College
11	Visit a College Campus	Take a College Entrance Exam (ACT or SAT)	Search for Scholarships
12	Submit Your College Application	Watch “College Success 101”	File Your FAFSA

a grant program with Ivy Tech,” Richmond explains. “He’s starting with freshmen and sophomores. We’re flagging them early.”

Currently, Owen Valley High School’s 2017 graduating class consists of 70 scholars, with 20% (compared to a statewide average of 35%) having completed the requirements to earn their 21st Century scholarship.

Richmond cautions against jumping to conclusions.

“There’s always more we can do to help the students meet those requirements,” she acknowledges. “And since it’s so new, it’s still kind of a learning experience as well. But (keep in mind that) although we have students who have signed up for the 21st Century scholarship, they may not choose to

insights on life in Spencer. She and her husband own a construction business and are involved in a variety of downtown revitalization efforts.

Reflecting on the Dragonfly shop, which opened in 2015, she notes that it’s not unusual for scholars to spend just a few weeks as interns before landing employment.

“21st Century Scholars tend to be more self-motivated, more mature, more trustworthy,” she notes. “A lot of them have great handshakes, which to me is such a dying art. They have a certain confidence in themselves that – even if it’s a quiet kid or one that wasn’t a cheerleader or prom king or that sort of thing – is very apparent as a business owner.”

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## 21st Century Scholars

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She praises the Scholars Success program for teaching invaluable life lessons.

“By 12th grade (when students are wrapping up ScholarTrack requirements), they’re organized. They’re thinking long term. Those

are skills – God! I didn’t learn that until I was probably 30 – the school of hard knocks. It’s a fantastic preparedness program for people for life. Not just for this educational piece you’re going after, but for life. For jobs that aren’t just jobs, but that are careers.”

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**RESOURCE:** 21st Century Scholars at [www.scholars.in.gov](http://www.scholars.in.gov)