

EARLIER ENTRY

Pilot Promotes High School Internships

By Symone C. Skrzycki

— *Experience is the father of wisdom*

Conner Battinau, an 18-year-old high school senior and basketball player, raves about his internship with a local contractor.

You could even call his experience a game changer.

“I feel ahead of the game big time,” he declares passionately. “It’s kind of funny. My mom and I always joke now that I was pretty discouraged about what I was going to do. I’ve never been a really strong school student. I’m glad I found out about this because everyone’s got a niche in their talents and it’s just about finding it.”

His talents and work ethic impressed the team at Koombobber Construction. Slated to graduate from Greenwood Community High School (GHS) in May, Battinau became an employee in February.

It’s a story GHS principal Todd Garrison loves to tell as he describes a pilot program that will connect high school students and employers with internship opportunities.

“How many times can we do that (replicate Battinau’s success) over and over? That’s our goal.”

Although the pilot hadn’t launched when Battinau first connected with Koombobber, his experience illustrates the power of high school internships.

“We’re aware of what employers are saying. We’re aware of what they need and what they’re not getting, so we’re trying to bridge that gap,” Garrison contends. “They need employees. They need skills. They want soft skills. We all know what it is that they need.”

He challenges employers to “help develop those skills within your own business” by hosting an internship.

Indiana INTERNnet – a free internship-matching program linking employers, students, high schools, colleges and universities – launched the high school pilot targeting seniors in fall 2017. It’s partnering with the Indiana Chamber Foundation, GHS and Owen Valley High School in Spencer.

“An expanded focus will provide high school students with more career exploration prior to college,” explains Indiana INTERNnet executive director Janet Boston. “Collaboration among schools and employers will promote more middle skills job connections and introduce an earlier pipeline of talent into the state’s workforce.”

Career connections

Experiential learning isn’t a new concept at GHS. Currently, 13 seniors take part in internships. Another 50 are enrolled in its Interdisciplinary Cooperative Education Program. What’s different about the pilot, Garrison points out, is that it’s a “one-stop resource.”

“The INTERNnet site (a searchable database, matching and reporting system) has been so valuable to the collegiate level with connecting employers and students and placing kids in internships of their choice. Now that the internship piece is becoming more prevalent and important to students at the high school level, it’s using that same concept with a few minor tweaks.”



Conner Battinau, then a construction intern (now an employee), picks up ricks of wood for transport.



Selyna Burton is the first Greenwood High School student to intern at Honey Grove Educational Center.



Approximately 1,200 students attend Greenwood High School, which offers a variety of hands-on learning opportunities.

Noting that too many high school students graduate without knowing what career they want to pursue, Garrison emphasizes that the pilot “gives kids a purpose.”

“This program is steering our kids in a positive direction – whether it’s career immediately or whether it’s to study a career and continue that education.”

In 2017, Indiana INTERNnet (an affiliate of the Indiana Chamber) held Intern 101 sessions for participating school districts and local employers. Among the attendees was Lindsey Smith, program director at Honey Grove Educational Center.

Honey Grove, which operates three early childhood centers, also runs before- and after-school programs within Center Grove and Clark Pleasant Schools. Smith has been pleased with experiences with interns from other school districts, but was drawn to unique opportunities presented by the new program at GHS.

“During our initial meeting, we were super excited about it because it takes a huge step out,” she remarks. “It’s hard to market over in the school corporations to get these girls to come over. It’s honestly hard right now to find people that are adequately trained to come join our profession. Unfortunately, it’s not the highest-paying profession, but people do it because of the love of kids and making a difference, and we want to be able to showcase that to get people interested in coming this direction.”

“One of my favorite things with Indiana

INTERNnet is that it kind of bridges that gap.”

Early this year, Honey Grove welcomed GHS senior Selyna Burton as an intern. She’ll work half days followed by coaching (e.g., behavior management, assessment, activities, lesson planning) with a mentor teacher at 3 p.m. while children are napping.

The arrangement addresses previous challenges involving timing.

“... Some of the girls that will come over to us in the afternoon are great employees, but we don’t have the time to have that overlap with the lead teacher. This is really helping them build that foundation instead of coming in and usually the lead teacher will leave at 3, and they might come in at 3.”

Getting a ‘leg up’

Starting with the class of 2023, every Hoosier student that graduates from high school must demonstrate employability skills and a readiness for postsecondary education in addition to earning a high school diploma.

“With the graduation pathway requirements, it’s become increasingly important for high school students to explore career opportunities. Making those connections with employers is vital,” Boston stresses.

One goal is preventing students from “getting lost” if they don’t pursue college.

“If we can get more students to participate in work and learn experiences and see there are many high-paying careers, it will help fill the skills gap we have in the state,” she asserts.

Connections stand out to Battinau as the

most beneficial aspect of his internship with Koombobber Construction.

“It’s not only about what I’ve learned from the actual job itself. I honestly have a pretty good knowledge of home improvement and what people like and how to deal with people,” he reflects. “But also, it’s networking. I’ve connected with a lot of people high up in construction, plumbing, electrical work – that’s probably going to be the biggest help.”

He plans to take classes and seek certification this summer.

Starting slow

If Garrison had an unofficial mantra for employers, it would be, “Register. Register. Register.”

He also urges them not to view the pilot as merely a GHS project.

“This site, we hope, will be active for all schools,” he comments. “A Center Grove student (for instance) who’s looking for an internship can find you as easily as a Greenwood student. Right now, it’s a pilot for this area – one school – and it’s us. But if you have any interest, register because (with the graduation pathway requirements), you’re going to see this grow and continue to grow. In all the corporations, the internships are going to become so much more prevalent at this age than just at that senior year of your college year – that last internship.”

Smith conveys that the experience is a team effort. She praises GHS staff and is proud to be part of the initiative.

“We’re learning it together on both ends and working out the kinks on both ends in terms of communication and understanding,” she notes with a laugh. “We don’t feel silly asking the questions we have because we’re all learning it together.”

Smith is looking forward to spreading the word about the program to generate more interest.

“Because this is a new program for us, we want to make sure we’re mentoring right. We want to make sure we’re not just putting someone in a classroom and using extra hands ...

“We’re excited! It’s a great partnership all around and a good learning opportunity. I appreciate taking the baby steps to it – we want to make sure we’re doing it the right way. We’ve got a good team between Greenwood, Honey Grove and Indiana INTERNnet to make a good partnership and do it the right way,” she concludes.

RESOURCES: Janet Boston, Indiana INTERNnet, at www.indianaintern.net | Todd Garrison, Greenwood Community High School, at www.gws.k12.in.us/greenwood-high-school | Lindsey Smith, Honey Grove Educational Center, at www.honeygroveeducation.com