

PAVING PATHWAYS

Events Connect Education, Industry

By Katie Coffin

Did you know that apprentices at the Electrical Training Institute in Indianapolis pay only \$2,500 over a five-year period for their postsecondary education?

This covers the cost of their books; their classes and training are provided by the industry free of charge to the students. Apprentices also earn an average of nearly \$40,000 each year plus health insurance and retirement benefits while training under a journeyman, and they will finish the program after five years with skills that are in demand.



"We think that anybody coming into our industry now is going to have full employment the whole time they're in the apprenticeship," emphasizes Jim Patterson regarding the Electrical Training Institute's program. "And we think there will still be a lot of work for them after they graduate."

This is the kind of information employers share with educators and school administrators at Postsecondary Pathways forums, sponsored by JP Morgan Chase and organized by the Indiana Youth Institute and Indiana Chamber. The events embody the goals of the Outstanding Talent driver of the Indiana Chamber's *Indiana Vision 2025* economic development action plan related to skills shortages.

These regional gatherings are designed for school counselors and educators to experience the work environments of local employers and learn about training and career opportunities.

"Postsecondary Pathways events open the door for ongoing collaboration between industry and education," comments Alisa Deck, director of college and career readiness at the Indiana Chamber. "Active involvement from everyone in the room is critical to spurring regional growth. These collaborations allow school counselors to gain a more comprehensive understanding of postsecondary options available, particularly on the local level. Counselors share this information with their students so they can make a more educated decision about their next step after graduation."

'Educate the educators'

Three Postsecondary Pathways events attracted more than 300 total attendees last fall in Auburn, Indianapolis and Elkhart. Employers in each region served on panels to explain their workforce needs and organized workplace tours for the educators.

"Our biggest goal was to help those who work with students to be excited about local career opportunities," explains Brian Wiebe, executive director of the Horizon Education Alliance. He was instrumental in organizing the Elkhart convening.

"We hoped that these counselors and coaches would become more familiar with local jobs, and that they would have a better sense of what skills and abilities and education future employees would need to be successful in the workplace."

With workforce gaps varying in different areas of the state, the events are organized to focus on specific industry needs by region. Wiebe says employers at the Elkhart forum expressed needs for individuals who can work collaboratively, think critically and learn on the job.

In the construction industry, Jim Patterson, director of the Electrical Training Institute, notes math and science skills are critical. Judy Sorg, director of Learning Link at the Community Foundation of DeKalb County, explains that many of the Northeast Indiana regional employers need production workers, welders and machinists.

Wiebe adds, "We wanted to avoid the situation where hands are thrown up in the air and statements like, 'We just can't get the workforce we need,' are made, and instead try to help school counselors and front-line staff learn from employers what they're actually looking for in employees."

Existing initiatives provide a foundation to increase and improve the efforts to prepare students for careers. Sorg points to Northeast Indiana Works' partnerships with counties and economic development organizations to provide job training. Wiebe outlines that employers are supportive of existing work-based learning initiatives and many serve on business/education roundtables.

Patterson is encouraged by the changing public perception of the skilled trades.

"We're looking for really good high school students and young people who were good students in high school who may have gone to college for a couple years and are now looking for a career," he asserts. "Construction isn't where we're looking to take the lower end of any high school class. (That stigma) is not as prevalent now as it was. I've been on this job for 12 years, and when I came in, I was really surprised by that attitude from high school guidance counselors and administrators. We're really looking for good, bright kids that have a background in math and science."

Moving forward

New efforts are already in motion as a result of issues raised at the Postsecondary Pathways forums.

“The event was really good as far as making contacts with the guidance counselors and the school administrators,” Patterson contends. “I probably get three or four invites a month to come speak to high school kids or participate in career fairs, which is up from a few years ago. Almost without fail every guidance counselor I speak with wants to learn more and wants to identify people they think would be good candidates for our apprenticeship program.”

Sorg says DeKalb County is in the process of organizing an industrial coalition in which business leaders would convene several times per year to work on strategies for bridging their workforce gaps. She credits the Postsecondary Pathway event as the springboard for the effort.

Wiebe offers that some of his region’s next steps include additional tours of employer facilities tailored for teachers, students and parents.

“For those front-line coaching and advising staff that had the opportunity to participate in the Postsecondary Pathways event, I’m expecting they are actively explaining postsecondary pathway opportunities to students based on the stories and experiences of the daylong event,” he adds.

There were two February programs in Jasper and Princeton, and planning is underway for seven more by June 2017.

“It’s a really exciting time for education and for industry,” Wiebe concludes. “So many more of these important conversations are happening, and Postsecondary Pathways events are a great example of a positive day where industry and education leaders work together.”



Patterson says there has been significantly more interest in the Electrical Training Institute program over the last two or three years, and he attributes that to greater awareness in schools.

RESOURCES: Jim Patterson, Electrical Training Institute, at www.electricaltraininginstitute.org | Judy Sorg, Community Foundation of DeKalb County, at www.cfdekalb.org | Brian Wiebe, Horizon Education Alliance, at www.heaindiana.org

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