

‘Leading the Way’ in Indiana Students, State Realize Value of STEM Program

There’s a common saying that usually goes along with sports: “Go big or go home.” For Project Lead the Way (PLTW) – a nonprofit organization that provides STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education programs in schools across the country – that sentiment has proven to be quite successful over the past year.

A new CEO, a move to a new headquarters in Indiana and the biggest year of growth in its history were all a part of 2011 for PLTW. BizVoice® has featured the initiative several times over the past seven years.

In spite of the recent growth and change, president and CEO Vince Bertram points out that the quality of the program will not diminish.

“One of the things we’re interested in as an organization is growth. However, we want it to be responsible and managed growth, meaning that quality is essential for the success of this program,” he expresses. “We have to align it with great teaching and quality controls.”

Bertram, former superintendent of the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation, began his tenure at PLTW in the middle of last year.

“I was engaged with Project Lead the Way a decade ago as a high school principal and superintendent, and well aware of the transformative power of Project Lead the Way. It engages students and provides rigorous and relevant opportunities,” he asserts. “We are committed to our core business: world-class curriculum through continuous improvement. At the same time, a third pillar for our organization is an engaged network. Our effort is to help facilitate this network and grow it, strengthen it.”

Working together

Focusing on STEM careers is a major component of PLTW. With America continuing to fall behind other countries in terms of science and math skills, Bertram sees PLTW and other organizations needing to step up and collaborate to bring the country back to the forefront of the engineering and technology fields.

“We have to align our efforts and yes, it has to be

collaborative. We have to be alarmed,” he declares. “We just can’t get as a country the kind of traction we need when people are going in different directions. Project Lead the Way can’t do this on its own, nor can anyone.”

One change that Bertram points to as a helpful solution is the move of the group’s headquarters from upstate New York to the north side of Indianapolis.

Indiana has been a national leader in the program and is currently the largest PLTW state, in terms of the number of schools with PLTW programs.

“Our country needs solutions now, and there’s really no state that has the policy in action to create the urgency around school reform and education improvement than the state of Indiana,” he explains.

“At the same time, Indiana has created the kind of environment conducive to running a business and organization such as ours, from various incentives to overall business environment that is very positive here. We can’t ignore the fact that Indiana is centrally located and the new airport access is extraordinary. If you look at the leadership here, it’s really unequaled.”

Indiana’s efforts

Bertram also acknowledges regional economic development efforts and superb teachers as reasons for Indiana’s success with the program.

“What makes Project Lead the Way successful, not only is its curriculum, but we believe professional development is also critical. We have

an intensive teacher training program with our university affiliates and teachers go through intense training for two weeks before they teach (the program),” he says.

It’s the students, however, who are the catalyst for true success. Students like Greenfield Central High School junior Mason Keller, who enjoys discussing his involvement with PLTW.

“I’m proud of everything I’ve built. We use a lot of recycled materials and we get to build great things out of those materials; it’s all very extracurricular and I’m proud of it,” Keller explains.

One example of how PLTW is working on students’ behalf stems from the Toyota North American training center, which trains workers on the machines and processes for building Toyotas.



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The Project Lead the Way move to Indianapolis included a luncheon featuring president and CEO Vince Bertram with students and remarks from Gov. Mitch Daniels.

“They created an associate’s program and a baccalaureate program with Bluegrass Community College (out of Kentucky) and bring in 18 to 20 students; they hired them at Toyota and they work two to three days a week while they are getting their degrees. They recruit PLTW students for their program,” Bertram notes. “This has been so successful; they are expanding this program to all North American training facilities.”

Higher education institutions have also embraced the value of PLTW.

“We have a number of schools of engineering asking on their applications if students have Project Lead the Way experience. Companies and universities are actively recruiting Project Lead the Way students and have had to redo their curriculum because the students are so far advanced. There are very positive outcomes and changes in higher education and

the workforce as a result of Project Lead the Way,” he describes.

Bertram looks to the business community to continue to promote the importance of STEM education.

“Advocacy is very important. We need role models; we need industry helping others understand and helping business compete. At the same time, our students need role models to help them understand the kind of opportunities that are available,” he affirms.

To view the March/April 2005 *BizVoice*® story on PLTW, go to the archives section of www.bizvoicemagazine.com.

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Vince Bertram, Project Lead the Way, at www.pltw.org

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