

FEATURE STORY



Tre Williams, 17, (top) trains at Gaylor Electric in Noblesville while working on his high school diploma. Doug Thrans, 16, (left) works on high school coursework at the Crossing School satellite campus at Thor Motor Coach in Wakarusa and Logan Rumbaugh, 16, (right) shows one area where students train on the floor at the wire harness plant.





EDUCATION EQUATION

Skills + Hope = Career Opportunities

By **Crickett Gibbons**

Inside a nondescript warehouse in Goshen, groups of high school students are running a certified tree service, building pallets, and making and selling candles. From developing business plans to handling production and tracking profit and loss, they are overseeing operations and running businesses.

Down the road in Wakarusa, other students work on the floor of a wire harness plant. In Noblesville, they are wiring electrical panel boxes.

This isn't an after-school program or an extracurricular activity. It's school. And for many, it's a second chance.

These teens, and hundreds of others across Indiana, are enrolled in the Crossing School of Business & Entrepreneurship, a private school based in Elkhart with locations across the state. In addition to working toward their high school diploma, they are gaining needed job skills and training at local companies. Many earn valuable certifications.

"We take education and make it relevant by running a business," stresses Crossing School founder and CEO Rob Staley on a recent tour of the Entrepreneurial Training Center (ETC) in Goshen. "The magic we found is when kids can run a business and apply the skills they learn, this gives them relevancy and purpose and hope."

The school also provides ready, trained employees for Indiana companies through its job training programs.

Skills for life

Wearing jeans, work boots and a reflective vest, Staley is obviously dressed for work – and not the kind behind a desk. As we walk around the ETC, he points out equipment, stressing that students operate all of it, while telling the school's story and greeting young men and women. He checks on lunch, donated by volunteers, and grabs a meatball sandwich after the students fill their plates and settle down in groups to eat.

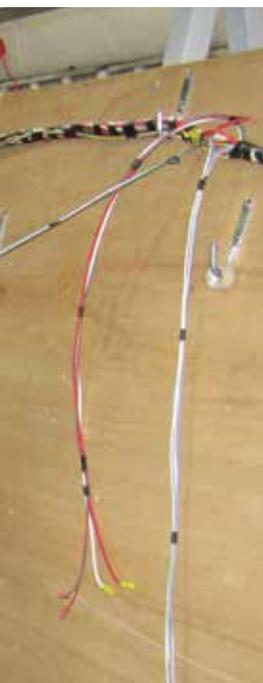
As a high school principal for 22 years, Staley says he realized "something was missing. The problem was making school relevant for some students."

While the principal at Concord High School in Elkhart County, he would visit expelled students who ended up in jail. "They described this school," he shares. "They said they wanted something that was self-paced, where they would learn how to work, know how to run a business, and it would be a family."

Staley started the Crossing with six students and two teachers in 2003. The school now operates 12 campuses plus four satellite locations inside Indiana companies.

All campuses provide academic courses through self-paced online instruction combined with small pull-out groups. Students progress through job skills training, from a business development class to hands-on experience, then on-site training at a company before a potential internship. Teamwork and leadership skills are important components of the program, as is faith-based character education.

The school also focuses on "soft skills," such as having a positive attitude, strong work ethic and good communication.





Gregory Fuller, 18, (left) is interested in pursuing a career at Gaylor Electric after completing on-site job training and earning his high school diploma.

Thirty minutes of “family time” is part of the daily schedule, in which students can talk about what’s going on in their lives and the daily challenges they may be facing.

The goal is to help struggling students graduate from high school not only with a diploma, but also equipped with skills and faith – in themselves and God – to become productive, contributing members of their communities.

In pursuit of its mission, the school forges partnerships with Indiana businesses and helps fill specific workforce gaps by providing trained employees.

Staley estimates the Crossing will work with 1,200 to 1,500 students this year. “In the last two years we have graduated about 550 kids with high school diplomas and job training skills, and most have been placed into a job,” he emphasizes.

To help fund tuition and programs, the Crossing raises between \$1.5 million and \$2 million a year. Many students are sponsored by a partnering public school or receive a scholarship toward tuition.

“Donors to this organization get a 50% state tax credit through the Indiana SGO (scholarship granting organization), and they also get the federal tax credit,” Staley stresses. “Why wouldn’t you want to support a school that is training your next workers? Businesses are very strong supporters of our organization, as well as individuals.”

Student-run businesses

In the business development course, students learn about running a business. “They learn how to market and sell. They do profit and loss statements, inventory control, all the ins and outs of running a business,” explains Jena Bontrager, who works in marketing for the Crossing. As part of the course, they make and sell candles under the name Spark Candles.

Students further refine these skills by running their own ventures, called microbusinesses, before gaining hands-on experience at a nearby company. They earn high school credits for the business development courses and job training.

Approximately 40 students at the ETC spend half their day working on a self-sustaining microbusiness or Spark Candles. Some build and sell pallets to Elkhart-based Kem Krest, providing 500 a week. Others run Xtreme Tree Service, offering tree removal, tree

trimming and stump grinding.

“As far as I know, we are the only certified high school tree service in the country,” Staley states proudly, showing off pictures of the team at a national conference. “Kids run all of the heavy equipment. They get trained and certified on the equipment, so they walk out of here with certifications and skills.”

Xtreme supports two other microbusinesses: a lumber company and a firewood business. The cut trees are turned into lumber using a Wood-Mizer portable sawmill or chopped into firewood or mulch to sell.

Students also keep the equipment running. “Seven guys do all of the mechanical work to repair engines, work on the trailers, maintain the saws,” Staley reveals.

It’s not all work though. Staley points to a photograph from the Apple Festival Run. “We do crazy things like carry a log in a race for two-and-a-half miles. Some people run. Our kids carry a tree.”

Samuel Byfield, 18, who works with Xtreme Tree Service, appreciates the variety and the challenge. “I enjoy learning something new every day. Every job is different. You’re not doing the same thing every day.”

Campuses inside companies

Less than 20 minutes away from Goshen, approximately 15 students spend their weekdays at the Thor Motor Coach wire harness plant in Wakarusa, a satellite Crossing campus. Academics, family time and job training are all provided on-site. Half the students work on the plant floor part of the day with the other half focusing on schoolwork; then they switch.

Satellite host companies contribute classroom space and a donation to the scholarship fund through the Indiana SGO. Employees also help mentor the students. The Crossing provides 15 to 20 students, a job training instructor, a classroom teacher and computers for academic coursework.

In the classroom inside the plant, Stephanie Hughes develops individual academic plans to help each teen meet high school graduation requirements. A certified math and science teacher, she previously worked in traditional and alternative schools and prefers this environment.

“I love being able to work one-on-one, helping them until they get it,” she notes. She also appreciates the freedom to share her faith and engage with students outside of school, perhaps hosting pizza study sessions or taking a few of them to her church’s youth group.



Andi Campos, 19, (left) demonstrates equipment used by Crossing students in training at Thor Motor Coach. Darren Maddox, 18, repairing a hydraulic pump for a truck, helps keep equipment running smoothly for the student-run Xtreme Tree Service business.

Shannon Cooper, the Crossing job training teacher at Thor, combines his experience in manufacturing with his passion for helping kids. He worked in manufacturing after being laid off from other positions during the Great Recession.

“Now I get to apply what I learned in that great hardship every day with the students ... to get them job ready,” he says.

It’s paying off too. Cooper proudly shares that one of the students was recently offered a paid internship at Thor training on a CNC machine.

From the company perspective, “it’s working out really well. There haven’t been any glitches,” according to Shelli Haydon, plant supervisor. “(The students) come in and help us out, and hopefully we’re helping them.” She adds that some work during their school breaks if they are at least age 18.

That’s the case for Andi Campos, 19, who is on track to graduate this June and has trained at Thor since August. “We just had a break, so I have a paycheck coming tomorrow,” she notes with a smile.

Campos enjoys the atmosphere and the relationships she has developed, both with Thor employees and other students. The employees “expect respect and they give respect,” she points out.

Logan Rumbaugh, 16, adds, “We work hard, but we also have fun.” He must be working hard; the plant manager, Stan Meyers, comments to “put a gold star by that kid’s name.”

Supplying trained workers

Currently, four employers host a Crossing satellite campus: Thor Motor Coach, Gaylor Electric in Noblesville, Jasper Plastics in Syracuse and Master Spas in Fort Wayne, where students train and also run a microbusiness. Other companies host student work teams that travel between a Crossing campus for academics and the business for job training.

“It’s a dream come true for a trade company that’s hurting for employees,” shares Alyssa Van Vactor, a regional director for Crossing. “We are providing their future employees who are trained in the soft skills ... and are graduating high school with certifications and job skills.” Van Vactor is a regional director for the Anderson, central Indianapolis and

Mooresville areas.

Crossing Job Training Director Nate Judd adds, “I can become HR’s best friend.”

Students also gain job training on work teams through partnerships with Hope Ministries in South Bend, Wagner Farm in Elkhart, Headsight agricultural company, community hospitals in Anderson and Kokomo, and DC Coaters and Package Right in Tipton.

The Crossing is moving to expand the all-in-one satellite model instead of work teams traveling to a job site. It’s more efficient – eliminating transportation time – and it more fully integrates the program into the company culture, Van Vactor shares.

The smaller group of 15 or 20 at a satellite also reinforces the family dynamic and allows students to open up about their lives, Judd notes, adding, “It’s definitely more effective on the job training side, and our data show that our students earn more credits in these locations, so it’s helping with their academic goals as well.”

For a business, “the satellite model allows a company to have a fairly long vetting process. If someone isn’t going to work out, we are going to remove that student and replace him with somebody who isn’t messing up and has potential,” he explains. “We want our students to get hired in non-poverty jobs. We want them to be productive, not only for their community, but for the host (company).”

It also can positively impact the culture of a company, Judd offers. At Gaylor Electric, mentoring has made a difference for the employees and students in addition to the benefits of the job training.

“We are seeing a healthy culture of mentoring and teaching from our folks who have had daily interaction with the students. The students have responded very well to this relationship and have experienced tremendous learning,” comments Chuck Goodrich, president of Gaylor Electric. “Both the students and many of my folks have gained a genuine caring for each other and no doubt will help each other be successful.”

He adds, “As the president of Gaylor, I know this will become a tremendous method of producing young folks upon graduation that will be well trained and ready to come to work full time as an employee.”

RESOURCES: The Crossing School of Business & Entrepreneurship at www.crossingeducation.com. Organizations interested in partnering with the Crossing can contact Nate Judd at njudd@crossingcec.com