



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Creating a Future Workforce



CAPSTONE PROJECT
TENNESSEE CERTIFIED ECONOMIC DEVELOPER CERTIFICATION

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Introduction

The United States is currently experiencing a nationwide labor shortage. As an example, Rutherford county continues to show unemployment rates consistently below three percent. Over seven thousand jobs remain unfilled. Whether that is due to the lack of skilled workers or a lack of interest in employment as a whole, it is negatively impacting businesses and industries. Companies had to pivot their recruiting strategies in an attempt to fill positions critical to their success. The landscape of business is changing. Companies have experienced wage wars, enhanced flexibility in work hours, and adapted systems and infrastructure to allow for the wider use of remote and hybrid work. Many companies have refocused their efforts on improving employee benefits and workplace culture. With the current state of the labor force it is more important than ever for companies to think outside the box in an attempt to attract and retain talent. It is paramount that business and industry seek to develop their talent pipelines earlier than ever. Forming partnerships between local industry and local schools opens up promising opportunities for the growth and betterment of the local community, students and the business community. Education is the key to informing and cultivating a dynamic workforce that will allow the business and the community to thrive.

Applicable TCED Coursework

All of the courses included in the curriculum for the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer program (TCED) provided invaluable information. The Tennessee Workforce Development course provided insight into the importance of building a pipeline of future talent for existing business. The instructor, Mo Collins demonstrated how essential economic developers are to bridging the gap between education, community and industry. She stressed the importance of the K-12 education system partnering with local industry to encourage the

development of a skilled workforce. In the Tennessee Business and Expansion Course, Laith Wardi emphasized the significance of focusing on the existing businesses within our community. Statistically, 80% of new jobs and capitol investment come from existing businesses within the community. To ensure the success of existing industry employers must have a pipeline of reliable talent that fits their needs. The Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course teaches business attraction is not based solely on marketing, but on the comparative advantages of a community. A readymade workforce is one of the biggest advantages in today's economy. During the class, online labor data resources like Jobs4TN.gov and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) were introduced as tools that can be utilized to gather the necessary data needed to attract new business. These resources are also useful in determining the health of a community's workforce.

Underperforming Schools

The local school system in La Vergne is part of the Rutherford County School (RCS) district. The school system ranks as one of the best districts in the state per Tennessee standardized test scores. In August of 2023, RCS Director of Schools, Jimmy Sullivan, announced that Rutherford County Schools has earned a level 5 rating. This is the highest rating available from the Tennessee Department of Education. The level 5 rating measures growth in the composite scores for every subject on the 2023 TCAP assessments. In June of 2023, The Nashville Business Journal recognized the district as having the number one public elementary school, the number one public middle school, and the number one public high school in the Middle Tennessee Region. The proven excellence of the Rutherford County School district continues to be a significant factor in the growth of families and businesses relocating to the community. This influx of population has made Rutherford County Schools one of the fastest

growing school districts in the state. RCS has the fourth highest number of students enrolled, placing behind Memphis, Nashville and Knoxville. The district added two thousand additional students during the 2021-2022 school year, with normal growth trending closer to one thousand additional students annually. Currently the school system's student enrollment includes more than fifty thousand children.

The majority of the Rutherford County schools that sit within the footprint of La Vergne share in this explosive growth, but unfortunately, they do not share in the academic accolades. La Vergne schools are underfunded, understaffed, and lack the level of parent involvement many of the more successful schools enjoy. All of those circumstances are contributing factors in creating a less than ideal educational environment within Rutherford County's third largest city.

According to a study published by the National Institute of Health in 2010, "The influence of parent involvement on academic success has not only been noted among researchers, but also among policy makers who have integrated efforts aimed at increasing parent involvement into broader educational policy initiatives. Coupled with these findings of the importance of early academic success, a child's academic success has been found to be relatively stable after early elementary school." La Vergne's standardized test scores are historically 15-20 percent below the district average. La Vergne High School's per student expenditure for the 2021-2022 school year was \$9151.50 per pupil. Other high schools within the same district show a higher expenditure per student. Siegel High School spends \$9754.87 per pupil and Blackman High School spends \$9506.09 per student. The district average for the same time period was \$9729.13. With the rapid increase in population, and the alarming shortage of teachers, there is concern that gap could widen. An overall lack of resources will make it even more difficult for the students to reach their full potential. La Vergne students account for approximately 13% of the total student

population in Rutherford County and represent a valuable talent pipeline for our businesses.

Without intervention these students will not be able to develop the academic, technical, or social skills required for success in the workplace.

Partnerships Between Businesses and Schools Improve Students Opportunities and Outcomes

One proven way to develop the talent pipeline is by creating partnerships between local businesses and schools. The most successful educational partnership in the Nashville Metropolitan Area is the Public Education Needs Community Involvement and Leadership, or “PENCIL” foundation. Formed in 1982, PENCIL takes a large-scale approach to enriching education, offering services to the entire Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) district. The PENCIL Foundation has enhanced the education of more than 81,000 students from 168 different MNPS schools, offering resources and opportunities the MNPS alone cannot provide. The PENCIL Foundation partners with other charities and the business community to fill gaps in resources and budget. In the 2022-2023 school year PENCIL formed 798 partnerships, completed 19,184 volunteer hours, and distributed \$3.51 million in supplies. PENCIL invested more than \$4.19 million back into the community. The foundation fosters the creation of a positive and active relationship between the business community and the education system. The main mechanism PENCIL utilizes to impact the education of so many students is through PENCIL partners. PENCIL partners are businesses and organizations that commit to contribute to the Metro Nashville Public School system in ways that will give its students a greater chance to achieve academic success. Partners donate time, resources, volunteers, skills and funds to increase student success. These partnerships cultivate positive school culture, provide mentoring programs, enhance teacher appreciation and allow for improved workforce exposure. PENCIL also facilitates a tutoring program for literacy. Their partnership with Dollar General provides a

supply store where teachers can stock up on school supplies free of charge. PENCIL has been enhancing education for students through businesses for more than forty years.

On a smaller scale the Hendersonville Chamber Foundation serves schools within the city of Hendersonville. The foundation provides “Golden Apple Grants” which allow teachers and administrators to apply annually for grants to fund innovative projects that augment education. Over the past thirteen years the Hendersonville Chamber Foundation has awarded over \$365,000 in grant money. They also partner with Volunteer State Community College to provide an annual scholarship. The chamber utilizes various fundraising techniques to raise money but rely heavily on corporate donations from local businesses.

Another smaller charity is the Murfreesboro City Schools Foundation. This foundation has been active since 2005 serving the more than 9,000 students within the Murfreesboro City School District. The majority of funds are raised through events and private donations. Teachers within the Murfreesboro City School District can anonymously submit grant requests, detailing the proposed project or initiative on their applications. The grant applications are then reviewed by committee and approved grants are awarded. Grants awarded for the 2022-23 school year included projects that focused on social and emotional learning as well as Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) based projects. For the 2022-2023 school year the foundation was able to award 33 grants totaling more than \$62,000 to classrooms and teachers in the city of Murfreesboro.

These foundations have demonstrated positive impacts within their communities. Creating a similar business backed partnership with the La Vergne school system would create growth opportunities for both the students and the businesses. Sponsorships of school events and programs will bring positive name recognition to the participating businesses. It demonstrates

the willingness of industry to invest in the local community and fosters good will among parents and students. Building relationships between local businesses and schools will demonstrate to the existing workforce, the parents, and the future labor force, the positive corporate culture and values of the businesses. When companies invest in the people and schools in a community, the people of the community are more likely to invest back into those businesses.

Partnerships Between Businesses and Schools Expand the Talent Pipeline

Partnering with schools will allow businesses to collaborate with educators to develop the talent pipeline with relevant skills and training. Sponsoring projects, career fairs, and classroom innovations will offer businesses the opportunity to open a dialogue with teachers and school administrators about the technical and social skills that are important to them. Establishing a dynamic relationship with local educators will encourage open communication about road blocks the educators are facing, and how the businesses can help educators overcome these hurdles. New pathways for learning and career readiness can be created. Sponsoring and participation in job fairs and career days will give local businesses a platform to demonstrate the jobs available and the skills needed to be successful in those positions. Job fairs will also give the company a way to showcase the benefits the company can offer and how they can help provide a sustainable future for employees and their families.

Engaging with students and schools also gives the employers a chance to dispel any myths or misgivings people may have about a particular career or industry. This is especially important when discussing the manufacturing and distribution industries. A study published by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute (MI) in 2021 predicts, “2.1 million manufacturing positions will go unfulfilled by 2030. These empty positions could cost the U.S. a loss of about \$1 trillion in GDP.” Most people have no concept of the vast array of roles available within these

industries. The general population often has preconceived negative ideas about what working in the manufacturing and distribution industry entails. In 2022 Anna Troiana, Editor in Chief of Converged wrote, “They may look at manufacturing jobs from the viewpoint of their aging parents and grandparents, who might have worked long hours under laborious conditions. They might believe that working in manufacturing means subjecting themselves to a large, dark, and dusty shop floor with workers standing in line assembling products along a conveyor belt that is constantly moving. Most young employees simply don't want to deal with the same harsh work conditions as they're looking to break out of the generational job rut. These outdated perceptions lead to disinterest in younger workers.” Due to La Vergne’s proximity to Nashville and several major travel corridors, the city has thriving distribution and manufacturing sectors. The employment opportunities for these sectors are largely underserved and underrated. Unfortunately, the typical jobs within these industries are generally not seen as having a viable career path. Many people still believe these jobs are less desirable, offering low pay and little prospect of upward mobility. When businesses engage with students, they have an opportunity to dispel myths and illuminate career pathways that lead to more skilled, higher paying jobs.

Another misconception within the school system is the notion that you need a college degree to provide for your household. When children are made aware of good jobs, with a living wage available to them, it can broaden their prospects for the future. Exposure to the job marketplace in late elementary and middle school can give students a better idea of careers that fit their capabilities, and additional options that are available if they choose not to pursue college. A survey commissioned by StrataTech Education Group in March of 2020 found that only 32% of respondents reported their high school promoted trade school. In the same study 51% of students said they considered trade school, but did not have sufficient knowledge about the

options available to them. Creating connections with skilled utility partners and other higher wage trades allows students to make more informed decisions on both CTE pathways and post high school graduation options. For example, jobs such as utility line technician, fiber technician, and meter reader can provide paid on-the-job training. According to Talent.com, the average annual salary in 2023 for a skilled trade in Tennessee is \$50,250. High school graduates are often unaware of the opportunities and paid training offered through apprenticeships in skilled trades. Plumbers, HVAC technicians, mechanics, electricians, and various construction jobs are also well-paying in demand careers that are often overlooked. In Tennessee there are many programs and careers available that are overshadowed when schools focus mainly on a college education.

Businesses can expand talent pipelines by partnering with local high schools through work-based learning programs. The work-based learning program is an avenue that can be used to bridge the gap between high school and in demand careers. Juniors and seniors sixteen years of age and older can earn high school credit and work experience through internships, apprenticeships, and paid work. These programs are directed by trained work-based learning facilitators employed by the Rutherford County School system. This approach allows students to gain experience working within an industry during school hours. Often employers will supply transportation from the school to the workplace. This kind of accommodation can allow students the opportunity to gain real-world knowledge of an industry. Having experience within an industry and a specific workplace can allow them to build crucial work skills needed for their future employment. It may also introduce them to careers and companies they may not have considered previously.

Businesses can also raise awareness by participating in teacher externships. Rutherford Works coordinates a summer externship program for middle and high school teachers. This

program allows them to gain knowledge about some of the most in demand careers and industries in Rutherford County. The program exposes teachers to local industry through facility tours during the summer. Teachers are encouraged to observe and ask questions about a particular career path or industry. The externship experience will allow the educators to better understand the available occupations in the area. The hope is that the teachers will take this knowledge back to the classroom and draw correlations between the skills needed in that field and the existing curriculum. These types of programs better equip teachers to demonstrate to their students the skills needed to successfully fill those positions. Businesses that participate in the externship program are essentially educating the educator on the available careers within their industry and the skills and education needed to obtain those positions.

Conclusion

Collaboration between schools and the business community creates a mutually beneficial partnership. When businesses invest monetary contributions, the donation of skills or services and employee volunteer time, it greatly improves the educational experience of the students. This type of investment by the business community also enhances the reputation of the businesses. Parents and students will recognize the investment in the community and the contributing companies will be seen as good corporate citizens.

In the case of the La Vergne school system, meaningful partnerships with the area businesses will help alleviate some of the voids created due to lack of budgetary support and lower parental involvement. Financial contributions would allow for needed equipment updates and educational innovation. Field trip sponsorships will enable schools to expand student cultural awareness by funding trips allowing children to experience theater, music, and sporting events. Per middle school administrators, Title I requirements make field trips impossible unless every

student has funding to attend. Due to this regulation the children have been unable to experience many field trips. Many students have never been outside of La Vergne. One middle school principal was seeking funding for two specific field trips. He wanted to inspire students by exposing them to a world-class theater performance in Nashville. A field trip may be their only opportunity to know the excitement of live theater, and the awesome talent of the professional actors and singers. His second request hoped to find a sponsor for the middle school soccer team to attend a professional soccer game at Geodis Park. La Vergne has a very diverse student population. La Vergne Middle School has a 39% Hispanic, 36% Black or African American, and a rapidly growing Arabic population. Soccer has become the most popular and successful sport at the school. The goal of these excursions is to provide an inclusive and culturally diverse experience for students. It also encourages students to place more value on the local business community that is supporting and investing in their education inside and outside the classroom. These experiences not only open the students' minds to new places and possibilities, but help instill the feeling of worth and support from their community.

Beyond the enhanced reputation businesses would gain, a partnership like this would also enable them to better shape their future workforce. Through collaboration with the local educators they could aid in the development of additional curriculum that could narrow the current skills gap in their own talent pipeline. Implementing new teacher externship opportunities and work-based learning programs provides an opportunity for greater awareness of the jobs and skills in the community. Better informed teachers, curriculum and student experience improves the talent pipeline.

Middle Tennessee is currently experiencing rapid growth. Rutherford County, the city of La Vergne, and Rutherford County Schools are all growing at an unprecedented pace. Businesses

continue to add jobs and relocate to the area, resulting in new residents and new opportunities.

The biggest challenge across all industries continues to be a lack of workforce. The best way to ensure the economic success of business is through investment. Investment in the development of people and community. To quote Dr. Sharon Younger founder of Younger and Associates and TCED instructor “Education is economic development.”

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