

Bridging the gap between business and education

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Stark County business and education leaders say they are working more closely than ever to address the local talent gap and to retain recent graduates.

You've probably heard the refrain: Thousands of local jobs exist but employers can't find workers qualified to fill them.

You might've also heard about the hundreds of graduates who leave Stark County — or never return after college — because they can't find a job.

Now there's a committee — and, for the first time, a point person — focused on eliminating this talent gap and bridge the communication gulf that exists between the business and education communities.

The committee is an overhauled version of the Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce's education committee. It has existed for more than a decade but only recently began to beef up its roster by bringing on more people from the education sector. It has become the defacto business advisory council for most Stark County school districts.

"The level of collaboration between business and education has never been higher," said Christopher Goff, who became chairman of the chamber's education committee last spring after serving on the task force for roughly a decade.

Goff said a primary motivator for the committee's evolution was the 2017 release of the Strengthening Stark report, which determined the county will continue to become less populated, older and poorer unless things change. Among its

suggestions are to better coordinate job preparation training and economic development so students are trained in the skills needed to fill available jobs and to begin student career engagement as early as middle school.

“Strengthening Stark is based on economic development and economic development is tied to education,” Goff said.

A second factor for the committee’s evolution is a state law that requires every school district in Ohio to establish a business advisory council. The council is expected to ensure that schools are teaching skills that align with the needs of businesses, help educators become more aware of the local labor market and promote work-based experiences within businesses. Some districts also use the Massillon WestStark Chamber of Commerce as their business advisory council. Many of the county’s career technical schools also have their own advisory boards.

Joe Chaddock, superintendent of the Stark County Educational Service Center, said education leaders always have had a friendly relationship with business but now they are doing a better job of working together toward the same goal.

“We’ve always been at the table with business, but I don’t think we’ve had the focus that we’ve had now,” Chaddock said. “... I think we’ve made tremendous gains in linking education and jobs.”

Then versus now

Goff, the chief executive officer and general counsel at Employers Health Coalition and a Jackson Local school board member since 2008, said the Canton chamber’s education committee originally was established because the business community wanted to communicate to school districts what business was looking for in terms of preparedness of students upon entering college and the career field. The problem was that the committee lacked school representatives, he said.

“When I first started (on the committee), you had business talking about education but didn’t have educators at the table,” said Goff, who also works as an adjunct law professor at the University of Akron’s School of Law.

While business representatives still hold the majority on the 40-member committee, there's now better representation from local school districts and educational nonprofits, as well as members from Stark County's colleges and universities and the University of Akron. The committee meets 10 times a year, alternating between touring a business and visiting an educational facility. Their meetings are open to the public.

Goff said going to the businesses and educational institutions has been helpful because business leaders can demonstrate where their needs are now and the type of jobs they envision will be created in the future, while educators can show how they are preparing future employees.

Among the needs the committee has identified are more paid internships and exposing students to the variety of jobs available.

"If (students) don't know about the jobs available, chances are they are going to end up somewhere geographic that is different than where they were reared," Goff said.

Meet the liaison

For the first time, Stark County has a person responsible for connecting businesses with the region's education systems. The Canton chamber hired Barbara Hammontree Bennett in January to serve as its director of education initiatives.

"Before, we would talk about the same issues and problems each month and came back each month with no one taking accountability for providing solutions," Goff said. "... Now the chamber has a single source of accountability for education."

Goff said previously a chamber staff person would be tasked with developing education initiatives while also juggling other important duties.

Bennett, whose position is funded through a two-year sponsorship through Employers Health Coalition, describes her role this way: "My mission is to make the connection between business and the school systems so we can build our

talent pipeline in Stark County.”

Bennett, a retired civil engineer from Hammontree & Associates who has served on the Stark Education Partnership board since 2012, said her job so far has focused on gathering information on the many programs that already bring education and business together and determine which successful programs should be expanded.

She also has been busy recruiting for the Greater Stark County Career Expo, an event hosted by the Stark County Educational Service Center and its 23 member school districts. The two-day expo, which began today, provides businesses a chance to meet students who are studying in a career-technical program. More than 1,800 students studying health care, trade and industry, business, IT, engineering, media and cosmetology were expected to attend over the two-day period.

Bennett also is undertaking other efforts, such as:

- Creating a communication campaign, using short videos, Instagram and other social media, to reach students who are going to college with the goal of keeping in contact with them so they still have a connection to Stark County and might think about returning home once they earn their degree.
- Pairing college-bound students with young professionals groups whose members could serve as mentors for the students while they are in college.
- Better promoting the jobs and internships available at local small businesses to college professors, high school guidance counselors and career-technical program instructors so they can make their students more aware of the available opportunities.
- Helping business leaders change their mindset on how they search for employees. Bennett said many companies use electronic application systems, which might deter or possibly filter out terrific candidates who might not have the exact degree or years of experience sought. She also

believes businesses need to start cultivating and marketing their company beginning at the high school level.

- Developing a tool box for small business owners that provides them an outline for best practices to use to start an internship program and how to get the best experience for the employer and intern.

“I think we’re on the right path,” Bennett said. “I think we have good synergy. I think a lot of organizations are now moving in the same direction and I’m excited to be part of it.”

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