

Stark Forum: Bridging education, workforce



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(Left to right) Joe Chaddock, superintendent of the Stark County ESC, Dave Kirven, business manager of Local 94, Susan Olivera, senior vice president of human resources and education for Aultman Health Foundation, Teresa Purses from the Stark Education Partnership and Jeff Talbert, superintendent of Alliance City Schools, participated in Thursday's Stark Forum. (CantonRep.com / Michael Balash)

By Kelli Weir / Repository staff writer

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A panel of educators and business leaders discussed Thursday the hurdles they face in trying to bridge the gap between education and the workforce as well as areas where progress has been made and where there may be future opportunities.

JACKSON TWP. A gap exists between the Stark County businesses searching for employees and the educational institutions training their future employees.

A report released last summer, "Strengthening Stark," shows the county is losing younger residents and needs jobs to be able to attract and retain them. It warns that if things don't change, the county will become older, less populated and poorer.

"It sounds like an easy problem to solve," said Dennis Saunier, president and CEO of the Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce. "But I've been involved in this for a long time, and it's not."

To address the issue, the chamber, along with its Leadership Stark County and ystark! Departments, on Thursday presented its quarterly Stark Forum: Inspiring Our Future at Kent State University at Stark's Conference Center.

The forum, facilitated by Michael Gallina, a former school superintendent who is now the vice president of communications and community outreach at AultCare, featured a panel of educators and business leaders. They discussed the hurdles in trying to bridge the gap between education and the workforce as well as areas where progress has been made and where there may be future opportunities.

The panelists included:

- Joe Chaddock, superintendent of Stark County Educational Service Center.
- Teresa Purses, executive director of Stark Education Partnership, who represented business and higher education
- Dave Kirven, executive leader in the Plumbers and Pipefitters Local Union 94, Stark County Oil and Gas Partnership and construction trades.
- Susan Olivera, senior vice president of Aultman Hospital.
- Jeff Talbert, superintendent of Alliance City Schools.

Here are some highlights from the discussion:

Existing hurdles

Talbert said two aspects limit what schools can do to prepare students for the workplace: Lack of time and state standards.

“The skills that employers are looking for that I’ve been hearing are not necessarily the skills that we’re required to teach to our career-technical students,” Talbert said. “We’re at a time where innovation is changing everything, but we’re still teaching some of the same standards.”

Kirven said the biggest challenge that the building trades face is awareness of what jobs are available and that the students can gain college credit while exploring a trade.

He said local unions plan to publish a booklet that gives a description of each building trade and the qualifications needed to apply for a job. The booklet will be given to every student in sixth through 12th grade as well as to every high school guidance counselor.

Progress

Following the publication of the Strengthening Stark report, Chaddock and other school leaders created a series of career expos for high school students that allowed businesses to interview career tech students. Six fairs were held last school year. Chaddock said a new series of the job fairs will start the first week of April.

Purses said the Strengthening Stark report spurred leaders of area colleges and universities to meet and discuss how they can work together to help graduates find jobs in the community. One solution that came out of their first three meetings is to host a combined career fair. Purses said a date has not yet been set.

Areas of opportunity

Olivera said even though Aultman already takes on 1,300 students a year through clinicals, job shadowing and internships, it could do more.

She said Aultman Health Foundation, the county’s largest employer, is searching for 300 new employees for jobs at Aultman Hospital, AultCare and its other subsidiaries. The jobs range from the specialized to those that need no college degree.

Educators on the panel said Stark County schools need more business people in their buildings, whether it's to volunteer for an after school program or to expose students to someone working in the field.

Chaddock and Purses added that students need more opportunities to gain job experience, such as through job shadowing or a paid internship.

"If we're going to retain our talent here, it has to be a partnership," Chaddock said. "... We can talk soft skills and work ethic and those kind of things but until you get a job, until you walk in and have to report and use those communication skills, it's a whole difference experience for our kids."

Talbert suggested that educators and business leaders consider an arrangement modeled after Ohio's College Credit Plus program, which allows students to take college level classes and earn college credit while in high school.

"A few years back we, as educators, were saying that our kids weren't being successful in college, so we began to meet with our college partners and said why wait to do college? We started to do what is now called our College Credit Plus program where kids start doing college earlier and they start it in high school when we can provide supports for them," Talbert said. "... How can we get them in the work place while we (schools) still have them and while we can still provide support for them?"

The next Stark Forum will be held on Dec. 6.

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