

National City Bank

SUPPORTS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EDUCATION.

By George Davis

Based on the census, only 17.9 percent of Stark County residents in 2002 had bachelor's degrees, one of the lowest figures in the state, which ranked 41st in the nation in the same category.



Pictured from left: Adrienne O'Neill, National City Vice President Jeff Garner, Christy Gale

"A fundamental premise is if you are going to have economic development you must have educated people to attract businesses and industries to this community," declared Stark Education Partnership's President Adrienne O'Neill.

Established in 1989 as The Education Enhancement Partnership (TEEP) with an endowment totaling \$3 million from the Timken, Hoover, Diebold and Stark Community foundations, the idea was to create a local education fund, patterned after a Ford Foundation program, to help raise student achievement in Stark County.

O'Neill, who joined the Partnership in 2001 from the Canton City Schools where she was the chief education officer, is quick to credit the group's success in collaborating with educators, civic leaders, business and industrial executives and foundations throughout Stark County.

Noting a huge connection between public schools and economic development, the Partnership has collaborated to develop innovative ways to improve testing achievement and students' desire to learn, achieve and go on to college.

To those ends, the Partnership team and its board of directors began work in 2001 on a Preschool through College Compact. The following year, the Partnership convened community leaders, local school superintendents and all five area college presidents, resulting in the formation of the P-16 Compact.

Chaired by Dr. John O'Donnell, president of Stark State College of Technology, the compact group meets bi-monthly to determine what strategies to use to meet the goal of a 100-percent high school graduation rate in all Stark schools and then dramatically increase the number of Stark high-school graduates going on to college from the current 50 percent level.

Transitions from preschool to kindergarten, kindergarten to first through fifth grade, then sixth through eighth, ninth through 12th and high school to college must be seamless. To meet this challenge, institutions have to work together, O'Neill told colleagues. "Everything we do involves collaboration. We couldn't sit here and get anything done without collaboration," she stressed.

Much of the Partnership's work in the last two years has focused on the transition from high school to college. Financial problems are a major hurdle for many students. To help clear that hurdle, the Partnership collaborated with many others to start a scholarship website, www.starkscholarships.org, which has led to increases in scholarship applications, the number of students receiving financial assistance and the number of scholarships now available.

As a result of advancing Stark's P-16 agenda, more students are taking exams to enter college while researchers are noting many ways to achieve better performance on ACT tests.

Dramatic lessons arose from results of the Explore System testing of Canton City eighth graders. Of 825 who took the test, 60 scored above the 95th percentile and hadn't previously been recognized as gifted students.

Students whose school districts require the Explore, Plan and ACT tests are far more likely to go to college, according to O'Neill. "This is a huge change in Stark where we believe all eighth graders should take the Explore test, all sophomores should take the Plan test and all juniors and seniors should take the ACT test," the author of numerous articles and co-author of three books stated.

The latest local collaboration achievement was this summer's Early College High School radical strategy to help boost the Stark college-going rate and inspire confidence in students' ability to achieve in the classroom.

Staged at the downtown branch of Stark State College of Technology on the campus of Timken High School, 99 Canton ninth-grade students enrolled and 97 earned six or more college credits in the first program of its kind in Stark and only the fourth in Ohio.

The program will continue throughout the students' four years at Timken High so they will have the opportunity to graduate with a high-school diploma as well as an associate degree in liberal arts from Stark State.

"If given success early enough - they see it and taste it - students will succeed in this project. Some of the things we're doing have found their way into High Quality High Schools task-force report, and we expect this to happen with the statewide P-16 Compact program, too," O'Neill declared. ▲

