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Straight A: Area educational groups awarded \$16 million from state

The announcement of the Straight A Fund grants mark the second award in \$250 million cycle of funding built into Gov. John Kasich's two-year budget.

Educational groups in Stark County and surrounding areas will receive about \$16 million through the state's competitive Straight A Fund grant.

The Ohio Controlling Board officially awarded the money Monday to the Stark County Area Joint Vocational School District, Canton City Schools and Portage Lakes Career Center as part the \$144.6 million in grant funding it approved for 37 projects across the state.

Monday's announcement of the Straight A Fund grants marks the second award in a \$250 million cycle of funding built into Gov. John Kasich's two-year budget.

State Rep. Kirk Schuring, R-Jackson Township, who chairs the Ohio House's manufacturing task force, said the grants will help educators fill the existing gaps in student development. During a celebratory luncheon Monday at Stark State College in advance of projects being approved, he said he often hears from company leaders that there aren't enough graduates with the right education to fill all the jobs they have.

"To me," Schuring said, "the primary purpose of that fund is to ... incentivize innovative education and 21st-century learning."

Here's an overview of the local winning projects:

YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS CONSORTIUM: \$13,604,214

The Stark County Area Joint Vocational School District will head up a partnership designed to emphasize business and technical education among 12 school districts, three career technical centers, three colleges and universities and 11 businesses and organizations.

The Young Entrepreneurs Consortium will reach an estimated 26,549 students in 11 counties — including Stark, Summit, Tuscarawas and Wayne — in an effort to bolster Ohio's workforce. The \$13.6 million awarded to the group will allow districts to work with the businesses and organizations to create stronger "education-to-employment" pathways and will cover the cost of modern classrooms, dual-enrollment credentials for teachers, evaluation of the project, professional development and administration.

On Monday, about 50 people gathered at Stark State College to discuss the project's goals and how it will unfold.

Barbara Cockroft, a retired Lake Local Schools teacher and one of the grant managers, came up with the idea for the project after watching students who weren't motivated to learn drop out of high school.

"Unless you were college-bound, sometimes people didn't treat you like a first-class citizen ... and I thought that was wrong," Cockroft said. "Not everybody needs to be a college graduate."

The Akron hub of the Ohio STEM Learning Network — which promotes science, technology, engineering and mathematics — will coordinate training for teachers in problem- or project-based learning.

Alison White, director of the Akron hub, said an example of this kind of learning might be zoo officials speaking to middle-school students about a steep hill on the property that presents a challenge for visitors with mobility issues. The students would be tasked with solving the problem.

"The goal is to teach kids how to think," White said.

Traci Hostetler, director of teaching and learning for Massillon City Schools, said the experience-driven lessons will expose students to careers and opportunities they likely didn't know existed.

She said an "enormous" number of students at Washington High School participate in career technical programs.

"Do we already see a need and desire for this already?" she asked. "Absolutely."

BRIGHTER TOMORROW: \$988,972

The Canton City School District plans to use its grant to help execute the second phase of its Brighter Tomorrow plan, which involves restructuring seven of the district's 14 elementary schools into literacy and math preparatory schools for students entering kindergarten through second grade.

The district believes the project will lead to higher reading and math scores on the third-grade state assessments as well as more than \$4.1 million in savings over the next five years.

Currently, 14 percent of the district's 672 third-graders are at risk of being retained because they have not proved they can read at a third-grade level as required by law. A literacy audit conducted in February by Keystone Literacy, a national research organization, found that students needed additional instruction in phonics and teachers needed



PHOTO / CANTONREP.COM / BOB ROSSITER

Clarendon Elementary kindergartners sing "Good Morning Sun" during a recent art show that brought together Clarendon and Harter elementary students. The program is one of the transition events that have been held in the Canton City School District as it restructures its 14 elementary schools to help students improve their reading and math scores before third grade. The district received a \$988,972 grant from the state's competitive Straight A Fund to help with the project.

better methods of presenting information in areas such as phonemic awareness, decoding and fluent text reading.

According to its grant application, Canton City plans to use the \$988,972 grant as follows:

- 45 percent of it will be used to redesign 98 classrooms from traditional desks in rows to learning centers with literacy and math stations. Purchases include 294 MacBook Air laptops (three for each classroom), 87 iPads for second-graders, 98 adjustable tables and the associated hardware, wiring and licenses for the wireless network.
- 55 percent of it will be used to retrain the district's 190 kindergarten, first-grade and second-grade teachers and principals in reading and math instruction. The money covers the cost of hiring Keystone Literacy and Carnegie Math to conduct the staff training, the new teaching materials and the cost of the staff's time for attending five days of training sessions. The district already has received a \$100,000 grant to help cover staff time costs.

By having multiple grade-level teachers in the same building, officials estimate the district will save \$821,770 a year because the district will not need to replace at least eight retiring elementary teachers and a resource teacher. Officials also said that improved reading and math learning also could reduce the need for costly remedial help, which will lead to further savings.

RAMTEC COLLABORATIVE: \$14,993,781

Portage Lakes Career Center in Green will join eight other career centers across the state to expand a Marion-based industrial robotics and advanced manufacturing center as part of the largest grant awarded in this year's Straight A Fund.

The center will see \$1.5 million of the nearly \$15 million grant to construct a Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing Technology Education Collaborative center, where students work with welding, automotive and robotics companies to operate the manufacturing facility.

Superintendent Ben Moore said the school was selected to participate in the project based on Department of Labor statistics that showed manufacturers in the area struggle to find skilled workers.

"RAMTEC is designed to fill that gap," Moore said.

The center also hopes to establish a dual enrollment partnership with Stark State College so students can take advanced manufacturing classes through the college.

Moore said \$250,000 of the grant will be used to renovate an existing 2,500 square-foot lab to replicate the RAMTEC center on the Tri-Rivers Career Center campus. About \$1.2 million will be used to purchase equipment, about \$41,000 will fund a mobile training trailer and some will be used for instructor training.

RAMTEC classes are expected to begin in January.

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Winning Straight A Fund grants Young Entrepreneurs Consortium \$13.6 million

The consortium partners 12 school districts, three career technical centers, three colleges and universities and 11 businesses and organizations to offer an estimated 26,549 students experiences in working with businesses and opportunities for dual credit. The goal is to stop students from leaving Stark County when they graduate and to help them develop the skills they need to start jobs in area industries.

Brighter Tomorrow \$988,972

The Canton City School District is restructuring its 14 elementary buildings to create seven literacy and math-centered schools for students in kindergarten through second grade. It also will provide training for teachers, with the goal of preparing students for the state third-grade assessments.

RAMTEC Collaborative \$15 million, \$1.5 million to Portage Lakes Career Center in Green

Portage Lakes Career Center is one of nine career centers that will be part of the expansion of the Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing Technology Education Collaborative center, which is based in Marion and trains students in industrial robotics and advanced manufacturing. High school and adult students can take classes at the center, and trainers from the center will have a mobile unit they can take to manufacturing facilities to offer on-site training for workers.

SOURCES Ohio Department of Education, grant recipients