

Public meets Private in Northeast Minnesota

The Northeast Minnesota Youth Council is joining forces with local Chambers of Commerce to expand the 'CEOs in the Classroom' program throughout the region, a career planning and awareness initiative that has enjoyed much success in the Grand Rapids area. CEOs in the Classroom connects local private sector business leaders with 8th grade classrooms using a structured model that emphasizes the importance of early career planning, including work opportunities in our region, testimonials from the speakers about how they achieved their workplace status, and how what students do at a very early age can impact their future in the workforce.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the program is the portion that outlines the financial reality of living on one's own. This eye opening segment includes a realistic portrayal of the income required to survive, let alone having the 'toys' that most kids desire like ATVs, snowmobiles, nice cars, big televisions, etc. The students are first asked what they think they need to make each month to meet their needs, inevitably a number far below reality. The speaker then clearly illustrates average bills for common costs they never considered such as utilities, rent/mortgage, insurance, taxes, etc. Jaws drop and attention is officially captured...they never think of career planning the same again (that is, if they ever thought about it at all).

Until now, CEOs in the Classroom has only been able to operate in portions of Itasca County. This partnership between the public workforce development system via the Youth Council and private sector intermediaries such as Chambers represents a comprehensive model that leverages many resources, including staff and funding. The success of CEOs in the Classroom depends on two major components: 1) recruitment and training of business leader speakers, and 2) recruitment and training of schools and educators, and coordination of appropriate classrooms with CEOs.

The Youth Council is acting as the school liaison component of the project capitalizing on contacts already existing through Council membership, including:

- The Office of Job Training's Outreach to Schools effort, 15 professional Career Counselors who provide free career guidance in 45 schools,
- The Applied Learning Institute's governing cabinet of principals and superintendents from 14 districts, a legislatively-funded secondary technical education program through the Northeast Higher Education District,
- School to Work/Tech Prep and Alternative Learning Centers
- Iron Range Youth in Action, a youth-run organization with over 400 youth participants in 13 schools and 37 communities with a mission to bring positive changes to the communities of Northern Minnesota

Working with Maven Perspectives, the consulting firm that owns the CEOs in the Classroom program, Youth Council staff are engaging Chambers of Commerce as the private sector liaisons, including the recruitment of appropriate CEOs and providing the funds to train them using established and structured training curriculum.

The Youth Council will then pool and leverage their resources to pay for the training of staff of Council member organizations to act as 'Local Coordinators', with duties to include the following:

- Attending coordinator training session with Maven Perspectives, including '*Strategic Partnering 101*'
- Developing list of local schools with an 8th grade audience
- Inviting schools to participate and promoting the value of the program
- Delivering training on school responsibilities
- Scheduling dates and class periods with participating schools
- Being present at each session to greet and introduce CEOs and facilitate discussion
- Conducting program evaluation based on surveys

Additional leveraged resources include the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce agreement to pay for the development of one common PowerPoint to be used throughout the region, the validation of which will include feedback from Youth Council membership and private sector representatives.

So far, several Chambers are in varying degrees of participation with the Youth Council. The Cloquet Area Chamber of Commerce has already begun a program in Cloquet. The International Falls Chamber has committed to the development of the program in Koochiching County, and the Laurentian, Two Harbors, and Hibbing Chambers of Commerce are currently negotiating partnership.

The CEOs in the Classroom project itself has been validated through several years of success in Itasca County. Therefore, many of the pitfalls and lessons of any new initiative have already been worked out, resulting in a successful model for ready replication. The training involved to administer the program is delivered in a train-the-trainer format using established curriculum and materials, so ongoing staff training to maintain the program is not necessary; once staff are trained, they can easily train other staff new to the program. The cost associated with the startup of this venture will be paid for from a variety of resources to minimize the cost to any single organization (estimated between \$2,000 - \$3,000 depending on the number of staff to be trained).

Never before has such a far-reaching partnership between the public workforce development system and the private sector occurred within the region. More importantly is the initiative's aim to impact the K12 system through the unprecedented outreach to students at such a young age. Therefore, this effort truly represents a partnership between three of the most important components of thoughtful workforce development – the public workforce development system, local employers, AND the public education system.