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ASSESSMENT: College attainment paramount in workforce growth

BY JEROD CLAPP | Posted: Sunday, December 6, 2015 7:45 am



Needs Work and Education

Charles Fritsch, Louisville, left, and Eric Edwards, Scottsburg, work through an electric motor lab during a basic electricity course at Ivy Tech Community College's Perkins Technology Center in Jeffersonville on Thursday evening. The center's programs allow students to acquire hands-on trade skills along with a college degree.

SOUTHERN INDIANA — High-wage jobs are easier to secure with completed education after high school, but getting residents in Clark and Floyd counties to see the

value in degrees and certifications might be half the battle in preparing tomorrow's workforce.

In the "2015 Assessment of Needs and Priorities in Clark and Floyd County, Indiana" document produced by the Community Foundation of Southern Indiana, three of the five priorities for education and workforce development focused on education after high school. To ensure the region has workers qualified for the jobs headed here, several community partners stressed the importance of creating a culture of educational attainment.

According to the study, 20.3 percent of Clark and Floyd residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Meanwhile, 46.5 percent of adults in Floyd County only have a high school or equivalent and the same goes for 49.2 percent of Clark County residents.

Rita Shourds, chancellor of Ivy Tech Community College of Southern Indiana, said opportunities are available between the colleges and universities in the region, but drawing people in is an important piece of increasing educational attainment.

"I think it's probably less about us preparing them because Purdue [Polytechnic], Indiana University Southeast and others have the programs to prepare them," Shourds said. "It's the value that we place on educational attainment in the community, that's where it really starts. It starts with people seeing the importance of a college education and what that's going to mean for their family and generations into the future."

As River Ridge Commerce Center attracts more companies and the first of the new bridges across the Ohio River readies to open Monday morning, getting degrees and certifications in the hands of working-age adults will become more of a focus for local education providers.

GETTING TO COLLEGE

Linda Speed, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Southern Indiana, said part of the culture change starts at high school. She said as the overall quality of life in the region is addressed in the study, education and workforce development are major components of improving all of those areas.

"I think it's important to know that a lot of what we're looking at with overall quality of life in our two counties ties into education and workforce development," Speed said.

She said looking at other areas of the study — including healthful living, economy, basic needs and others — all are centered on the education they can provide to a workforce.

From there, education can help qualify more people, get them better paying jobs and raise the tax base.

But a lot of that starts in local schools, which are facing challenges. The study notes a sharp increase of families living in poverty in the last 15 years and that families of young children are more likely to live in poverty.

With school funding tightening across the state, school districts rely on educational foundations to help them fill in some gaps created by their budgets.

Tyler Bliss, executive director of the New Albany-Floyd County Education Foundation, said his organization is mostly focused on helping K-12 students, both in and out of the classroom.

The foundation's Great Classroom grants give money to teachers to put more resources in the hands of students, helping students after they go home, which is a big need.

“It's not just about supporting our kids while they're in our schools,” Bliss said. “So many of them have issues that are beyond the school day and it's about supporting them while they're in our schools and when they're out of them as well.”

He said a big focus of his foundation is to make sure students are taken care of in other ways, whether it's through providing meals with Blessings in a Backpack — which gives children on free or reduced lunch food for the weekends — or giving them basic school supplies at the beginning of the year.

He also said sometimes, those students don't have the same support network as those who don't live in poverty. Though a program in the New Albany-Floyd County Consolidated School Corp., Mentor Mii, adults meet with students several times a week to just give them some extra support.

“I think one of the biggest opportunities to get involved in and make a difference in these kids' lives is to mentor them,” Bliss said. “It's the greatest one-on-one, hands-on way you can get involved and really make an impact in people's lives.

“I think we need more mentors in our community.”

Greater Clark County Schools' Education Foundation also has a focus on helping students, but it's partly directed by the district's college and career readiness program.

Catie Wheatley, the director, said they give every junior in the district a chance to take the ACT college entrance exam at their own schools during a normal school day. She said

that has a tendency to help boost their scores, which ultimately gives them more opportunities to secure scholarships and drive down their out-of-pocket tuition costs, or student debt.

She said college and career readiness is paramount in the district, but also for the region, so that push will continue.

“I think that's a concern that I'm hearing everywhere right now,” Wheatley said. “I know that our school district is very concerned with making sure that we are creating the kind of pipeline to the future that business locating here or considering locating here are going to have the talented workforce that they need.”

CONTINUING AND FINISHING EDUCATION

Bridgett Strickler, executive director of Education Matters Southern Indiana, said her organization focuses on helping adults finish their degrees. According to the study, their goal is to get 10,000 more people to finish their degrees in the next five years.

She said about 40,000 adults in the region have some college, but never finished. To help them persist to a degree or certificate, that could mean helping them with other concerns.

She said many of the people her organization is working with already have jobs and families, so helping them juggle schedules is a big part of what they do. But she said family emergencies can also determine whether someone finishes a degree or not.

To help with those circumstances, she said Education Matters is partnering with local universities in a pilot program that would help students with their finances in the case of an emergency, such as a furnace breakdown or new tires for a car.

She said helping adults adapt to college also is important.

“The other piece of that is we also want to do all that we can to make sure the adults who are already enrolled in programs complete those degrees because it is difficult for working people who are wearing a lot of hats, taking care of families and having full lives,” Strickler said. “They're adding to their plate when they're also trying to work, raise a family and earn a degree.”

Shourds said some of that might involve online course offerings. She said while Ivy Tech and other campuses have robust online programs, not everyone is cut out for them.

“You have to be careful because not everybody can be successful in online learning,” Shourds said. “It’s a double-edged sword. You put someone in there who’s not really prepared for it, they’ll fail and they’ll fail drastically.”

At IU Southeast’s Economic Outlook Breakfast in November, Uric Dufrene, executive vice chancellor for academic affairs, said while more jobs are coming to the region, the workforce here isn’t growing at the same rate as the jobs.

Strickler said she thinks changing the culture of getting an education can help meet the need for workers — and employers — in the region, especially if younger children are inspired by their parents.

“What I really love about our mission is that for the most part, we’re working with grownups who have grownup situations and children and families,” Strickler said. “When a mother sits down after dinner with a child and they’re both doing homework, it has a profound impact on that family. It sends a message to the child that it could change the trajectory of this generation.

“Children are watching their parents walk the walk. I think that’s profound.”