



Boards Making a Difference

Greene County Schools' Career Academy Incentivizes Graduates to Stay Local

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In 2016, Greene County Schools was beginning to think their dream of a new high school for students would never become a reality. The community rejected the bond issue twice—for a bond issue to pass, the community must vote 60% or higher in favor of the referendum. After the second failed attempt, passionate community members got involved and presented the board and district with the concept of a career academy.



“When the idea was posed to us, we were really excited.

A career academy would give our students more options...they would learn that they don’t have to go to a four-year college if that’s not right for them, this would expose them to all different areas of the working world so they can figure out what they want to do without wasting a significant amount of money attending a university and realizing it’s not right for them,” says Board President Mark Peters.

The board embraced the idea, which should come as no surprise. “Rural Iowa needs options for our students. This felt like the perfect opportunity to give our rural students a chance to have an excellent paying career,” says Peters.

The district incorporated the concept of a career academy into the bond issue, creating a package of sorts. This new bond referendum, with a total price of \$21.5 million, included a new high school, career academy, gymnasium and auditorium. The community passed it with 68% support in April 2018.

“From my perspective, we need to have more school-business connections, and that’s what we aim to do with this career academy. We need to get students in these programs and apprenticeships, so after they graduate, there’s a job lined up for them. The goal is to incentivize students to stay and work in the community rather than move away,” says Superintendent Tim Christensen.

The district visited the Pella Career Academy as an excellent model of a successful program already in place and are taking what they’ve learned and incorporating into their own career academy.

CAREER ACADEMIES: IOWA'S SOLUTION TO RURAL DECLINE?

Across Iowa, rural communities face the same problems: shrinking population which leads to declining enrollment and consolidation for school districts; aging infrastructure that dissuades families from moving to rural towns; and struggling economies due to lack of jobs and workers because families move away. Greene County Schools is hopeful that with this new career academy, they can turn around this decline and provide opportunities for students to live and work in Jefferson after high school graduation. And not just 'get by' with a beginning salary—their career academy will offer multiple career strands that can pay competitive wages in industries that struggle to fill open positions.

“We’re talking about students making \$60-70,000 starting out, they can get that job without any (or limited) college debt. We as educators need to understand the concept better and rethink that all students must earn four-year degrees. Once businesses get these kids in the door and get them working, nothing says you can’t send them back to school to get a two-year degree or four-year degree and move them up the ladder. They’ve built that relationship, which gives them a foot in the door,” says Christensen.

The board feels strongly about creating incentives to keep students local.

“It’s on us to provide any and all opportunities we can to keep our students here. We need to have jobs for them. That’s where we’re headed, and that’s what we are going to do,” says Peters.

The career academy will offer six strands:

- Computer Programming and Software
- Culinary Arts/Hospitality
- Construction
- Healthcare
- Agricultural IT
- Advanced Manufacturing

PARTNERSHIPS BLOOM INTO APPRENTICESHIPS AND UNIQUE PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS

Students in the career academy will have opportunities to participate in a variety of options if they follow certain strands. Students who complete the computer programming and software strand may be selected for the Jefferson Forge Academy program, paid for by computer software company Jefferson Forge. Once students complete the 6-18 month program and if they show a certain level of competency, they have potential to be hired by the company. Jefferson Forge is opening a new branch in Jefferson this fall and hopes to build its own workforce right in Jefferson with these apprentices.

Another strand with an apprenticeship opportunity is advanced manufacturing. The district developed an apprenticeship with the United States Department of Labor and has partnered with four companies in Jefferson. Students in that program can be involved in the welding apprenticeship.

“Our career academy really ties in with the governor’s goal of having 70% of the workforce with some education beyond high school. What a great opportunity we are providing students—students can earn college credit, participate in apprenticeships, earn two-year degrees, and their public school is paying for it,” says Christensen.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT MAKES CAREER ACADEMY, GYMNASIUM AND AUDITORIUM POSSIBLE

In addition to the original idea of the career academy initiated by community members—several community members have also contributed private donations. One individual citizen even donated \$100,000. “They just wanted to be part of the project...and they could see the benefits of growing rural Iowa,” says Christensen.

Grow Greene County, the corporation that holds the gaming license for Wild Rose Casino, offers limited grants each year and committed \$4.5 million for the gymnasium and auditorium.

The Board of Supervisors committed \$5 million to the career academy, generated from TIF windmills in the county.

And the Greene County Schools’ own school board committed \$4.5 million in PPEL SAVE funds.

Peters says, “The community is so excited about this. Community members ask all the time how it’s going, it’s really generating enthusiasm about what’s happening in Jefferson.”

The entire project costs \$35.5 million, made possible with these donations and grants from the community.

IOWA CENTRAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A CRITICAL PARTNER

The local community college, Iowa Central, is a critical partner with Greene County Schools in a variety of ways. The community college is responsible for staffing at the new career academy, and worked hand in hand with Jefferson Forge to create curriculum for that apprenticeship program. And the community college has committed to creating its own computer science program to better serve students.

Greene County’s career academy is not limited to just students enrolled in the district—Christensen is working with school districts surrounding Greene County, so their students can attend as well.

“Our superintendent is good at saying—just because we have done it this way for the past 20 years, you don’t have to do it the same way. Do something different. There’s no reason not to try something different,” says Peters.

We agree. This is an innovative idea that is going to “do something different” for students in Jefferson, Iowa and beyond.

Meet the Green County School Board