

## CORRIDOR SUPPORTING LOCAL TALENT PIPELINE EFFORTS

**TWENTY NORTH IOWA BUSINESSES** planted seeds for the future among junior-year students at a Mason City High School Career Expo in November.

The expo is designed to grow future local employees, while giving students a chance to explore career ideas and learn about work opportunities right here in this area.

Instead of an old-style job fair where students wander around booths, this annual event is more like speed dating. Students sit down at five company booths of their choice for presentations and questions. Each stop during the afternoon fair lasts exactly 12 minutes, with music marking the travel time in between presentations.

"It gives them a chance to find out what the business does, where it's located, training provided, what they look for in employees, and their high-demand needs," said Hunter Callanan. The fair is sponsored by the Corridor, IowaWORKS North Iowa, and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

In the morning, students also had the opportunity to take the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate test. "The NCRC measures not so much what you know, as how do you figure things out," Callanan explained. Results are reported as certificate levels, instead of a number score. "It's something the student can put on a resumé, and it's also a good gauge of what students need to work on."

"This is the third year for the fair, and the businesses have loved it," said Chad

Schreck. "They want to be engaging students. They know they won't get a workforce out of it tomorrow, but they are playing the long game."

Kelly Hanson, General Manager of POET Biorefining in Hanlontown, said, "Clearly this is where we want to be. We're able to describe local jobs and opportunities. We see so many young people going away to college and not coming back. Our counties are shrinking. As an employer, we have to go outside our area to recruit for some of our tech jobs. We're hopeful that at this junior-year level, we might be able to put an idea in someone's head."

Hanson said at least half of his 46 employees have more than a high school degree, and it's a young workforce, with an average age of 26. "We're looking for new ideas and lots of energy. These are well-paying jobs, and you can make a great living."

Other employers attending represented healthcare, public services, construction industries, manufacturers, food services, and biotechnology.

Karla Wymore, counselor at Mason City High School, said, "We're lucky in our area to have so many great businesses, with opportunities at all levels, for students right out of high school to those coming back from college. To see the school and the community work together on this is awesome."

Schreck pointed out that only 22 percent of jobs require a college degree, in North Iowa and nationally. Approximately 55 percent require middle skills, some post-secondary education but not necessarily college level. That's raising discussions about a tendency to emphasize four-year colleges as the next expected step after high school. "We're starting to ask, are we teaching to the wrong area?" Schreck said.

"One of our biggest concerns is filling in the 1,200 jobs posted for this county, up to 2,400 if you include the counties around us," he said. "Employers here are crying, 'We can't get the people for all the jobs we have, but we need to grow.' We don't want to lose their growth to someplace else."



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