

A Business and Education Partnership

School districts and local businesses come together to prepare students for future careers

SESSION: *Building Business Engagement with Your Schools* | **Presenters:** Richard Breen, Jay Capelle, Rick Merdan, business/education partnership committee, Incentive Community Foundation; Kyle Cronan, principal, Port Edwards School District; Brian Giese, school board treasurer, Nekoosa School District; Eric Siler, teacher, Wisconsin Rapids School District

Faced with a set of tough, new economic challenges, a trio of central Wisconsin school districts and local businesses decided their best bet was to start working together. But first they had to get past the blame game – businesses blaming schools for not preparing students to work and schools blaming businesses for not having enough jobs.

“Because we had this environment of trust and respect, we were able to meet these challenges and do amazing things,” said Richard Breen, an adjunct instructor at Mid-State Technical College and a member of the business education partnership committee formed by the Incentive Community Foundation of Wisconsin Rapids.

The collaboration involves the Wisconsin Rapids, Port Edwards and Nekoosa School Districts, all located within miles of each other, as well as the major industries in the area. In the beginning, both educators and business leaders had to learn more about each other. One of the first steps in building the partnership were tours: business leaders visited local schools and learned about their realities of limited resources and financial restraints; educators toured the local businesses and were amazed at the high-tech facilities.

“That was very eye opening,” recalled Kyle Cronan, principal at Port Edwards Middle and High Schools.

Once they learned more about each other, the new partners began to work on solutions to their shared problem. Businesses had jobs but not enough potential employees with the right kind of skills while schools needed to provide their students with the right kind of training and education to take the jobs that were available locally.

“What we’re really talking about is collaboration,” said Rick Merdan of the Incentive Foundation.

So far, the partnership has yielded a week-long summer class for educators who spend time at local businesses and learn more about what they do and what types of jobs are available. Local businesses have also sent employees in to help teach classes. And local high schools have won grants from Constellation Energy that have resulted in construction of solar installations at each school. Students learn how to maintain and use the installations, giving them valuable training in a fast-growing industry.

The partnership has also resulted in new manufacturing apprenticeship programs and additions of Project Lead the Way programs and a middle



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school STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) charter school that will help expose more students to science and technology education.

An ongoing part of the partnership is education for parents and students so that they understand that going to college and earning a four-year degree is not necessary in order to obtain a good, high-paying career.

“One of the myths in central Wisconsin is that there aren’t any jobs,” said Cronan, noting that local businesses expect to have 1,500 job openings in the next five years as current employees retire. “There is work out there. We want to keep our students in central Wisconsin and help grow our communities.” ■