

Dedicated to Excellence

Spencer County Program Strengthening Workforce, Changing Attitudes

By Symone Salisbury

One of Indiana's newest workforce development programs, Project Excellence, is already gaining widespread attention. The two-year pilot project was developed to address workplace basic skills deficits in Spencer County's manufacturing industry.

According to the 2000 Census, 18.8% of adults in the county over the age of 25 had not graduated from high school. Further, National Adult Literacy Standards (NALS) show that literacy levels of its adult population are primarily at the two lowest levels (on a scale of one to five, with five representing the highest).

Project Excellence is divided into two phases. The first created engineering and advanced technology academies at Spencer County's two high schools, while enhancing services at its two adult learning centers. The second phase involves transforming an adult learning center into a lifetime and work readiness facility.

An integral characteristic of the project is one that all workforce literacy programs strive for: strong collaboration among business and education sectors.

Background

A *Demand-side Strategy to Meet Indiana's Workforce Basic Skills Challenge*, published by the Indiana Chamber earlier this year, reports that approximately 960,000 to 1.23 million working Hoosiers have literacy skills below the minimum standard for successful employment in a knowledge economy.

The formation of the Southwest Indiana Network for Education (SINE) in 2001 provided a foundation for developing Project Excellence, designed for potential implementation throughout the state and nationwide.

Facilitating lifelong learning in nine Southwest Indiana counties, SINE established two adult education learning centers that are a vital component of Project Excellence: North Spencer Alternative Education Center and the A.H. Kennedy Lifetime Education Center in the southern part of the county.

Both award certificates of achievement (CTAs) and offer a variety of educational instruction.

Along with SINE, the Project Excellence team includes both North Spencer and South Spencer school corporations, Lincolnland Economic Development Corporation, Spencer Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Spencer County Learning Partnership.

A variety of funding sources have been utilized to make the project possible. Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels and Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman are among those who have visited Spencer County to learn more about the effort.

Tom Utter, executive director of the Lincolnland Economic Development Corporation, calls Jim

North Spencer Alternative Education Center's Rob Moore shares KeyTrain features with Jim Edwards of Edwards & Associates. Both praise the learning tool for its uniqueness and effectiveness.



Edwards “the guy who put together the big picture” in establishing Project Excellence.

Edwards, a longtime business leader in the area, is president of Edwards and Associates.

“I think the main theme is how you can change the culture of learning and progress in your high schools with an effort like this,” Edwards proclaims.

“Companies are needing to purchase new equipment,” Utter adds. “Each piece of equipment has a higher technology level than the piece of equipment before. And to have confidence that the workers will be more comfortable reaching into this newer level of technology makes the company more confident about investing in that technology and staying here manufacturing in Indiana.”

Individualized instruction

Located in Dale, the North Spencer County Alternative Education Center serves Spencer and Perry counties. English as a Second Language (ESL), General Educational Development (GED) and adult secondary credit training are just a few of its concentration areas.

Eighty-three students representing 11 counties attended ESL training in 2004-2005.

KeyTrain, an interactive assessment and training tool, customizes students’ training with course topics such as reading, observation, business writing, applied mathematics and teamwork. Students can access lessons and complete tests at their own pace.

KeyTrain software is part of the WorkKeys™ initiative, a national model used in Indiana to evaluate basic workplace skills.

Spencer Industries, Inc., a company specializing in plastic thermoforming processes, worked with the center on a pilot program earlier this year that was funded by the Indiana Department of Education, Adult Education Division.

After taking the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE), a total of 11 quality assurance technicians and CNC operators who demonstrated “the most potential for improvement” were selected for the project.

Training took place three hours each week onsite during workers’ scheduled shifts. An instructor personalized training for each participant, based on his or her TABE performance, using KeyTrain and following visits to the shop floor where the trainer observed how the workers could apply math and reading to everyday operations.

“She (the instructor) came back to the class and she had those materials right there,” notes Rob Moore, director of the center. “She made those direct connections to their jobs.”

The results were outstanding.

“After about 30 hours of instruction toward the end of June, we post-tested them with a different form of the TABE,” Moore explains, “and we saw that 91% of the employees (10 out of the 11) made measurable learning gains, which is very difficult to do. A learning gain on that test represents two traditional grade levels in school. That’s very difficult to get. The state average is 43%. To get 91% is phenomenal.”

Deborah Warren, training supervisor at Spencer Industries, declares, “As a company, we were very satisfied with it, and we’re looking forward to continuing it (for another two years pending funding approval).”

Eventually, CTAs will be awarded for employees who successfully complete training.

“I think the overall program is very futuristic,” Warren remarks.

Mike Cockrum is a member of the Adult Education Works in Indiana team, a division of the Department of Education. He is a workforce adult education specialist for the southern region of the state and serves on an advisory committee for the Spencer Industries pilot project.

“We customized the curriculum to the individual and to the company both. It fits both their needs,” he asserts. “I think that was the key. The flexibility of being able to get in there when it was appropriate and least disruptive to their production schedules (was critical), and then we hired a good instructor. I think those were the three key items that make that unique and successful.”

Housing lifelong learning

The counterpart in the southern end of the county is Rockport’s Kennedy Lifetime Education Center. Once a high school, the building focuses on community education, business incubation, leadership and conferencing activities, as well as senior citizens organizations and activities.

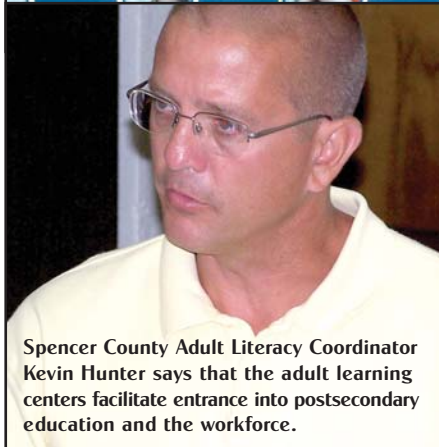
Serving as a gathering point for organizations and businesses to cultivate strategic economic



Tailoring training to meet individual needs was instrumental in the success of the Spencer Industries pilot project, according to Mike Cockrum, Adult Education Works in Indiana.



Inmates can earn their GEDs through the Jail GED program.



Spencer County Adult Literacy Coordinator Kevin Hunter says that the adult learning centers facilitate entrance into postsecondary education and the workforce.

development discussions is one of its many functions. Other highlights include GED preparation, ESL training and adult literacy classes. Online college and business/industry courses will be available in the future pending grant approval.

Oakland City University offers classes at the facility. Daymar College was scheduled to begin doing the same in September. North Spencer School Corporation's administrative offices also are located there.

Liberating accomplishments

The Jail GED Program offered through the Lifetime Education Center helps inmates receive GEDs and pursue postsecondary education.

Twenty-two people received their GED as of July, with four individuals earning honors.

Not only does correctional education benefit the business community by generating more skilled members of the workforce, but statistics indicate that it reduces recidivism, thereby decreasing community expenditures and increasing safety.

Instructors teach inmates career skills such as communication, teamwork and applying math to the workplace.

GED graduates can develop leadership skills by mentoring fellow inmates. Many participants have started attending college and entered the workforce following their release from incarceration.

"They all work together," says Marva Stater, one of the instructors with the Lifetime Education Center. "If one of them falls behind, the rest of them will pull in and pick him up. It's been great."

Edwards adds, "It does so much for building their self-esteem, creates leadership skills and makes a new person."

Project Excellence

A Community Partnership Model for Workforce and Economic Development

Beyond reading, writing, and math . . .

A Demand-Side Strategy to Meet Indiana's Workforce Basic Skills Challenge

For more information contact Jim Edwards

jdedwards@psci.net



Technology equipment brings the workforce to the classroom (above) at the county's engineering and advanced technology academies. Below, instructor Jennifer Koehne observes a student putting problem-solving skills to use on a project.

Career academies

Spencer County's engineering and advanced technology academies at Heritage Hills High School and South Spencer High School are structured identically and use Integrated Technology Concepts (ITC), designed by Amatrol, Inc., to teach students.

The pilot program at Heritage Hills last year included 13 participants. "It is very much self-directed, self-paced," observes Jennifer Koehne, academy instructor at the school.

Students earn high school and college credit. Those who successfully demonstrate knowledge learned in the academy also can earn CTAs. Upon beginning their junior year, students can enter the academy, a two-year program. Academy curriculum is in addition to the state's Core 40 education requirements.

Adult and incumbent workers can use the equipment after hours and during the summer.

The ITC learning system blends technical and workplace basic skills training. Laboratories and interactive software give students hands-on experience as they work through learning

activity packets. Following completion of lessons, participants execute mini-projects. They rotate seating arrangements throughout the semester to team with different people.

Working with classmates, one of the larger projects requires students to devise, make and market an invention.

ITC's Enterprise System emphasizes soft skills such as entrepreneurship, team building, business presentations, research, leadership and organizational structure.

Paul Perkins, president of Amatrol in Jeffersonville, describes Spencer County's implementation of the labs as "one of the best I have seen anywhere." He praises the county's "true partnership of government, industry and education.

"By serving other populations (in addition to high school students)," Perkins contends, "Spencer County is getting more return for its investment, and they are validating the quality of the program to the high school students."

What challenges do the academies face?

"It's an elective," Koehne states. "If it's difficult, enrollment will go down. We're a little concerned about that. Wondering where that fine line is between being challenging, but not being too difficult."

For the community, by the community

Approximately 20,000 people reside in Spencer County.

Timmie Westfall is director of the Adult Education Works' workforce education project.

"Adult Education has been doing workforce classes for a number of years," she relates, "but when the Chamber (literacy) study came out, our state director was kind of the first one to step up and say 'we're going to reorganize our projects and create a system for workforce education.'"

Mary K. Cardinal, executive director of SINE, maintains that Project Excellence will "change the attitude of the employer, the education community and the workers (in Spencer County).

"It's going to set a standard for people that want to work in Spencer County," she declares. "And it gives the workers a means to get there. Anyone looking to move into Spencer County knows that the people can deliver and that's one of the most critical marketing tools. And I think that's going to be the biggest outcome."

Measuring progress

"What's made it difficult for (people in) business and industry, and I was one of them," Edwards shares, "is that they're looking for instant solutions and instant gratification. This thing has been a building block thing; you have to have elements put in place, tested, validated where a business and industry person who really understands things can quickly see, 'Hey ... this is working and there's no reason we shouldn't do this all over this region and all over the U.S.A.'"

Progress in the years since SINE's inception confirms the viability of the vision.

"What we're finding significant now," comments, Kevin Hunter, Spencer County adult literacy coordinator, "is the number of adults that are coming in and wanting to get their GED and then move onto higher institutions of learning. So these learning

Dedicated to Excellence

centers are kind of bridging that gap between either employment or in moving on toward higher education.”

The number of adult learners, for example, increased from 176 in 2000-2001 to 530 in 2003-2004.

Future outlook

Edwards says the county's progress in the last few years could not have happened had it not been for SINE.

Within the next five years, he says that he expects, “to see a whole lot more technology-based industry here because we're creating the technical skills.”

He would eventually like to implement more academies in other industries, such as health and bioscience.

“The same principles are there,” he claims, noting that Project Excellence began with engineering and advanced manufacturing academies because “that's where the need is the most predominant in our region right now.

“One of my visions,” Edwards continues, “is that at the end of the day we will have a system where no Hoosier worker will be left behind or no Hoosier student will be left behind if they have any bit of ambition. The only thing we're missing is our year two project of putting the distance learning capability for various college and university courses into our adult learning centers.”

Westfall adds, “And I hope to see the (Project Excellence)

model replicated throughout the state, because every piece and part, everything critical to how to do it is there.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Jim Edwards, Edwards & Associates, at jdedwards@psci.net

Tom Utter, Lincolnland Economic Development Corporation, at (812) 649-2119 or www.ledc.org

Rob Moore, North Spencer Alternative Education Center, at (812) 937-2671

Deborah Warren, Spencer Industries, at (812) 937-7237 or www.spencerindustries.com

Mike Cockrum, Adult Education Works in Indiana, at (812) 424-4473 x 203

Mary K. Cardinal, SINE, at (866) 380-7463 or www.sineonline.com

Timmie Westfall, Adult Education Works in Indiana, at (812) 937-9979

Kevin Hunter, Spencer County adult literacy coordinator, at khunter@siec.k12.in.us

Paul Perkins, Amatrol, at (812) 288-8285 x 224 or www.amatrol.com