



PROFILE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Westport Central School
Westport, New York

About Westport Central School

Westport Central School is located north of Albany in Westport, NY, a small town overlooking Lake Champlain in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains. Westport has a seasonal economy, with its 1,300 citizens working primarily in tourism-related businesses including restaurants, retail, golfing, and boating: there are several large marinas, with a great deal of boat traffic coming in from Vermont and Canada. There is no local manufacturing base: Most businesses are customer-service related.

This small town is served by a small school system: The Westport Central School District houses one school, Westport Central School, which serves 250 children in grades K-12, all in a single building. While some employment-related classes are taught within the school, students seeking career and technical education often take classes through the Clinton-Essex-Warren-Washington BOCES.

Partnership: The Business Communications Class

One of the advantages of a small community is the existence of personal relationships between educators and businesspeople, a situation which allowed for the creation of an innovative partnership focusing on employability skills for local high school students.

According to Adam Facteau, Westport Central School's business teacher, the idea for this partnership came about during a conversation four years ago with the president of the local Chamber of Commerce. She told Facteau that local businesses like the restaurants and the marinas were hiring foreign students or college students for summer jobs because many of the teens in Westport were not meeting employer's expectations. He suggested that they do something about it, she expressed a great deal of interest, and the idea for a course on employability skills was born.

The year before they implemented the course, Facteau, the superintendent, the building principal, the chamber of commerce president and a few other local businesspeople met so that business leaders could talk about what they were seeing in the workplace. They shared their thoughts as to why 16 and 17 year old students weren't being employed as they could be, with an emphasis on the job application process and employability skills. After several sessions, they worked together to outline the content of this new course, which walks students through the employment process and includes topics such as cover letters, applications, resumes, interviewing, business presentations, customer service, 21st century soft skills, being punctual, and responsibility.

The one semester course is listed as the school's business communications course. According to Facteau, framing the course in this way allowed them some flexibility, as the standards for business communications in New York follow model national standards but are not overly prescriptive. The standards already emphasized the employment process, which was a clear fit, but had less of a focus on customer service and soft skills, which were additions made by the design committee.

As a partnership-driven initiative, the course assumes a high level of involvement from local employers. Every other Thursday, a business owner or manager will come in and kick off a new topic such as how to interview or the essentials of good customer service. Facteau allows them to introduce the topic as they see fit: He wants them to come in with their real experiences and their credibility so students gain the employer's perspective firsthand. He will then cover the subject over the next couple of week, following standards on the subject while tweaking the presentation to capitalize on the business speaker's discussion.

The course ends with students participating in actual interviews with local employers. Facteau gives business partners a rubric to use in gauging students' skills, and makes the interviews a large component of their grades; however, he does use some judgment in applying business partners' scores, since some interviewers pay a great deal of attention to filling out the rubric while others tend to disregard it as they get more engaged in the interviews. Students always get significant feedback from the process, and many actually end up with summer jobs as a result: In fact, he estimates that three-quarters of his students get summer jobs, and now that they have been doing it for three years, young men and women come home from college already knowing they have a summer job.

The partners have found that, by being proactive, engaging businesses in the class has been an easy process. The class is offered as a spring elective, so in the fall the chamber sends emails to members, and Facteau attends chamber meetings to promote the class. They have never had a problem filling speaking or interviewing slots; in fact, this past year was the first in which they had to turn people away. They see a high repeat participation rate, with three or four new businesses coming in each year as well.

All of the participants – including the school district, business community, and students – are enthusiastic about the initiative. School district leaders love the idea because they see students being taught by professionals in various fields, in a way that allows those business leaders to visit the school and see what is happening not only in this class but in other areas as well. Business partners value the program because it allows them to develop a stronger pool of applicants, make direct contact with future employees (remembering that many students get hired during the culminating interview process), and allows them to introduce their businesses to local consumers. Finally, students find the class to be both practical and engaging, particularly enjoying the opportunity to learn from local businesspeople.

Advice on Building Partnerships

Facteau offered two thoughts for educators interested in setting up a partnership-driven program like his Business Communications course:

- While CTE teachers are probably the best candidates for creating such a course, primarily because of the business mindset they bring to the table, this is something that any teacher can do. Facteau believes that most teachers are in it for their students, and they can use that focus on student success to move outside of their comfort zones to make this happen.
- It can be hard for teachers to walk into a business environment like a chamber of commerce meeting to pitch this idea, but Facteau notes that it is not nearly as intimidating as it looks: A teacher who walks in to ask "how can I help to provide you with the best possible summer employees" is almost guaranteed to get an enthusiastic response. Furthermore, given the state of the economy in general and district budgets in particular, he expects little resistance from districts in approving an unconventional program like this. School districts should love it because it

gets business leaders who may otherwise not have any tie with the schools (except for paying taxes) into the building so they can see the school firsthand, which helps to build those community relationships. It just takes that first initial step by the teacher to approach businesses and suggest the idea.

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