

Project Prepare launched to fill manufacturing jobs

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Story Highlights

- Southgate Corporation will provide some funds needed, but other businesses may also contribute.
- Licking County Foundation will establish scholarships, which Grow Licking County will distribute.

HEATH – A new public-private effort aims to help fill open manufacturing jobs that pay well and do not require a college degree.

Cheri Hottinger, president of the Licking County Chamber of Commerce, unveiled Project Prepare, an effort to attract youths to manufacturing jobs and train them to fill the skilled positions.

The new initiative, announced at Monday's Grow Licking County community meeting at the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, involves a variety of businesses and organizations.

"The whole goal is to get more workers ready in the pipeline for our manufacturers," Hottinger said. "We want to get more high school students excited about manufacturing and what it is today."

As the economy improves and the unemployment rate declines, manufacturers have found it difficult to fill some positions. As more baby boomers retire, the problem of finding workers is expected to increase dramatically.

"It's an opportunity to help explain and educate older youth about the opportunity for careers in areas that have been commonly overlooked by that generation," said John Fisher, director of the Licking County Department of Job and Family Services.

Southgate Corp. will provide some of the funds needed, but other businesses also might contribute, Hottinger said. The Licking County Foundation will help establish the scholarships, which Grow Licking County would distribute.

The chamber, Grow Licking County, OhioMeansJobs in Licking County, the Licking County Foundation, Southgate and Buckeye Skilled Trades have joined forces to make scholarships and training available to high school students.

Licking Valley and Heath are two pilot high schools in the program. Licking Valley students have toured Thirty-One Gifts and DOW Chemical and will visit Owens Corning this week.

Wes Weaver, principal at Licking Valley High School, endorses the new program.

“I think it’s an idea whose time has come,” Weaver said. “No question, the (lack of) skilled workers is going to cause a problem and hold us back economically.

“We graduate some kids who don’t want to go to college and not learned a skilled trade, and the job market is not kind to them.”

Meanwhile, there are 435 manufacturing jobs open in Licking County today, according to the OhioMeansJobs website, Hottinger said.

“Owens Corning has been a big driver of this and been very supportive,” Hottinger said. “It’s kind of exciting. I think it can help a lot. We’re showing we’re doing more than just talking about the problem.”

Some Grow Licking County board members said the biggest challenge is getting parents on board, as they might insist their child complete a four-year college program.

Parents might envision a manufacturing job as dirty and monotonous, members said, but times have changed.

“A majority of the positions are high-tech,” Hottinger said. “They can make a really good living in the manufacturing field.”

Licking Valley parents will be supportive, as evidenced by a question during a Common Core debate, Weaver said.

“A parent asked why is everything geared toward college and what about workforce jobs,” Weaver said. “That’s an appropriate question and a great question.

“I think we have parents who would be enthusiastic about it.”

Heath Mayor Mark Johns said the program not only helps provide money to train youths for good-paying jobs but also avoids the massive costs of college.

“Some don’t have the financial means for college or want the student debt,” Johns said. “This isn’t about steering kids away from education. You have to do something beyond high school, but it doesn’t have to be ‘Big State University.’ ”