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A CURE FOR OUR WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

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The AED Foundation When looking for service technicians, wouldn't it be nice to interview high school graduates who can explain things like electrical schematics and hydraulic valve operations? There's a group of them at Chicago's Gage Park High School.

At a time when our industry complains that young people don't finish high school with skills fit for the workplace, early results in Chicago are showing that a partnership between local businesses and a high school may be the best way to improve the caliber of tomorrow's workforce.

At Gage Park High School on the city's south side, you'll find a group of graduates who say nothing but good things about the construction equipment business and its career opportunities.

"Your industry is family to me," says senior Victor Cruz. He enlisted in the U.S. Army after graduation and wants to be trained as an equipment technician. Students in the program started learning about construction equipment and industry business operations when they were sophomores.

Three years after The AED Foundation launched the Equipment & Technology Institute as a model program for others to emulate in the future, its first group of graduates has far exceeded expectations. Experimenting with this initiative as one idea aimed at reducing the nationwide workforce shortage, the foundation's Workforce Development Action Team views Gage Park as the laboratory for testing the efficacy of business/school partnerships in the construction equipment industry.

CAREER-FOCUSED

To the delight of Chicago Public School officials, Gage Park High School had

52 institute graduates-84 percent of the students who originally enrolled in the program in 1997. In a typical year only about 65 percent of students who enter Chicago public high schools graduate from them, according to school board figures. Also, although precise figures are not available, class attendance rates were significantly higher for institute students than for the general student population.

Moreover, 23 of Gage Park's top 50 students were enrolled in the Equipment & Technology Institute, according to Arlene Crandall, a teacher at the school and a director of the program. Completion demands studies in electricity, hydraulics, engines and other technical courses, in addition to having students reach higher-than-required standards in math, language arts and science as outlined by The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), the foundation's original partner in the program.

Crandall says the students, parents and teachers believe that the institute's career-focused approach to secondary education was a key reason for the students' academic success.

Other nontraditional ingredients-including smaller class sizes, special tutorials for struggling students and face-to-face contact with business partners-are being analyzed for similar use by school districts in other parts of the nation.

Thousands of dollars in scholarships were awarded to the institute's graduates. Senior Sonia Vasquez, 18, was awarded the Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship and will attend the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

Six students were named to a national list of Top 100 Hispanic High School Students by *Super Onda* magazine in Santa Barbara, Calif. No other high school in the nation had as many graduates on this year's list.

The AED Foundation presented a special Certificate of Accomplishment to 32 of the graduates for fulfilling every requirement of the rigorous, three-year program. These students finished their high school education with at least 26 hours of college credit earned at nearby Daley College. All of them are headed to two- or four-year college programs, Crandall says.

At least one student is already in classes at the two-year technical "university" program Caterpillar operates at Illinois Central College in East Peoria, Ill. Patten Tractor & Equipment Co., Caterpillar's Chicago-area dealer, hopes to hire several students for jobs as entry-level technicians. Others may attend Universal Technical Institute, a private technical school with a campus in suburban Chicago.

JOB OFFERS

One local employer quick to see the value of the institute graduates was United Parcel Service (UPS), which operates its largest package handling facility in nearby Hodgkins, Ill.

"These are beyond a doubt some of the most prepared high school students I've seen," says Dan DePue, a UPS executive who hires some 1,500 entry-level workers out of high schools every year. He nabbed more than 20 of the Gage Park graduates, who will start at \$8.50 per hour. DePue was also impressed with the students' background in technology, which can open additional career paths for the students.

John Turner, the executive in charge of marketing and information systems at Turner Equipment Co., Middleburg Heights, Ohio, is gratified by the performance of the first graduating class, but disappointed that local equipment dealers did not hire more. Turner was chairman of the foundation's Careers Committee when the institute program opened in 1997.

"It's wonderful that this initiative has turned out the way we envisioned it in the first place, but it's too bad more companies from our industry weren't standing in line to recruit these kids," Turner says. But he is optimistic that interest from industry companies will increase now that the program is demonstrating success. "These results show that this can be an effective way to bring more students into our industry, and I hope more business groups around the country will follow the example."

Geography somewhat limits recruitment of Gage Park students for full- or part-time work. Most of the area's equipment dealers are located in the suburbs and collar counties around the city, miles from the Gage Park campus, which is only a 10-minute drive from downtown Chicago.

REMEMBERING PARTNERS

Frank Giannelli, the foundation's director of workforce development, has worked with the students, teachers, parents and administrators since the program opened. He says the foundation is considering ways to make it easier for equipment companies to recruit and interview graduating students.

He is confident that the outstanding performance of the institute's initial graduates will inspire realization that this kind of program better prepares students for entry-level employment. Further, he believes some students heading to four-year colleges or taking jobs in other fields will come back to the construction equipment industry in the future. "Gage Park students who

go off to four-year college may wind up working for distributors or manufacturers as managers, sales people or engineers," he says.

There is evidence to substantiate his belief.

John Porter, the NCEE consultant who worked with The AED Foundation in setting up the Gage Park program, said school/business partnerships in California find that students remember the adult partners who supported them in high school. Frequently they seek out jobs later at businesses with which they have familiarity.

Larry O'Neill, Patten Tractor's general manager of product support, is one local distributor executive who has made sure the students are familiar with construction equipment. "Mr. O'Neill," as they respectfully greet him, chaired the steering committee of school and business leaders who administer the program.

He also takes students to the company for tours, machinery demonstrations and pizza lunches. O'Neill frequently travels to the school to talk about industry careers and counsel individual students on career opportunities. Patten Tractor also provides training for Gage Park teachers in all aspects of construction equipment business operations.

"Most people in our industry don't realize that the Gage Park program is a gold mine," O'Neill says. "Not only are these kids better prepared for the kind of work our industry demands today, but they are better citizens because they understand more about hard work, personal focus and how the real world works. Businesses that don't see the benefit of programs like this will continue to have workforce problems down the line."

O'Neill is the kind of business champion needed to spearhead the success of a successful partnership. "We've learned from experience that a local organization wanting to start a school partnership needs a champion-one person who is committed to cultivating and recruiting students for careers in our business," says former committee chair Turner.

UNIQUE FOR NOW

The AED Foundation will continue to monitor the progress of the graduates to determine if what they learned more effectively prepared them for work or post-secondary education than a traditional high school program.

In the meantime, Gage Park will continue to be one of the only high schools in the United States where students learn about construction equipment

technology. In fact, there will be 58 sophomores, 56 juniors and 35 seniors in the program when school reopens in late August.

As the foundation's Giannelli's points out, "If every major market area had a high school program like Gage Park's, maybe the industry wouldn't be worrying about a shortage of skilled technicians."