

TRACK partners employers, educators to prepare students for in-demand careers

By MARY TAYLOR

It's no secret that many businesses in Kentucky and across the country face challenges in finding the skilled employees they need, and employers, educators and others agree that part of the solution is the development of career pathways for secondary students.

Tech Ready Apprentices for Careers in Kentucky, or TRACK, is a statewide program helping local industries and school districts in the Lincoln Trail region do just that.

Through a partnership of the Office of Career and Technical Education and the Kentucky Labor Cabinet, this pre-apprenticeship program starts with areas of study taught in high school career and technical centers and, in partnership with local employers, creates certification programs for students that are based on industry needs.

For students, it's an opportunity to earn credit toward and gain entry into an apprenticeship program in an in-demand career field as well as gain real-world workplace skills. For employers, it's an opportunity to raise awareness of career opportunities and to cultivate the pipeline of skilled workers they need to remain competitive.

Trish Niles, human resources manager at Mid-Park Inc. in Leitchfield, saw the benefits of such a program and sought out methods to get involved.

"We were having difficulty finding local employees," said Niles, who also is a member of the Lincoln Trail Workforce Development Board. "We started looking for ways to attract and train local people."

In support of a career pathway that would benefit students and an in-demand industry, Mid-Park helped Grayson County Schools develop a machinist program.

"The determination of a lot of individuals made it happen," Niles said, noting that the program not only benefits students and employers, but also the entire community.

TRACK, the only statewide program of its kind in the country, began in the manufacturing sector, but plans are in the works to expand to business, healthcare and information technology.

TRACK enables pathways tailored to industry needs. Employers select the required courses and training and choose students who meet their specific criteria.

To participate, employers must have a registered apprenticeship program with the Kentucky Labor Cabinet. They work with high school career and technical centers in their area to determine a pathway for students, and to establish what classes are needed for foundational knowledge of their chosen apprenticeship program. There are no required costs except wages paid to student employees.

“It was very easy to become involved,” Niles said.

The program ideally lasts two years. Once a student completes the program, they receive an industry certification through the Kentucky Labor Cabinet, and all hours worked count toward an apprenticeship. This provides students a head start on career and post-secondary training. They can be hired into an apprenticeship program as soon as they graduate.

“It’s a way to show students what options are available, and let them try out a skill before committing to a career,” Niles said.

A channel for strengthening the partnerships needed to meet workforce demands, TRACK is an opportunity for employers and educators to work together to foster local economic growth and to ensure students have the career skills they need, she said.

“It will draw in more businesses because having an abundance of trained individuals is very appealing to a business considering an expansion or selecting a site,” Niles said.

And because students are engaged as they begin making career decisions, pre-apprenticeships can help keep skilled workers in the area.

“It’s been an excellent partnership,” Niles said. “It’s a win for everyone in our community.”

TRACK is showing results for students and employers in multiple Kentucky counties including Grayson and Breckinridge in the Lincoln Trail area. For more information about getting involved, call (502) 564-4286 or email mary.taylor@education.ky.gov.

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