

Great Falls leaders look to coordinate education efforts

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► Educators, business people examine Kalispell model in hopes of giving high schoolers boost, strengthening work force

By PETER JOHNSON
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Great Falls business and education leaders are exploring ways to better coordinate their efforts to get high school students thinking about careers earlier and to get the school district to share classes with the college of technology.

The dozen or so Great Falls educators and business leaders who made a two-day fact-finding tour of Kalispell's successful work force development program a few weeks ago stressed that the Great Falls effort is still in the early talking stages.

Several of them said that their

groups — the Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce, Great Falls Development Authority, Great Falls School District and Montana State University-Great Falls College of Technology —

are keenly interested in what Kalispell business people and educators are accomplishing and hope some of the ideas can be used here.

The Kalispell program, developed over nearly a decade and put into action the last two years, involved the business communi-

ty prodding the school system and community college to work together to develop a curriculum

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— Great Falls Development Authority President Brett Doney

See WORK FORCE, 5A

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FROM 1A

built around such needed career clusters as health services, engineering and construction trades, business and management, agriculture and natural resources, arts and communication, and social and human services.

Students as young as high school freshmen are encouraged through job fairs to choose a potential career that interests them. Their elective classes are then designed to spur their development in those fields.

The school district and community college cooperate on ways high school students can either take classes at the college or get credit later for classes taken in high school. Several high school students have obtained two-year college degrees in fields in high demand at the same time they received their high school diploma.

Sixty business and professional people served with educators on field advisory committees that helped change curriculum, pass bond issues for a new high school and identified critically needed jobs in health- and construction-related fields.

“We're in the midst of a positive curricular change built around a career cluster model,” said Kalispell Superintendent Dan Zorn.



Olds

“Business and education representatives have worked diligently the past two years to create a structure that provides our students with an education that is marked by rigor, relevance and relationships.”

Joe Unterreiner, president of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce, said the program “more fully integrates business and education, so that students have a real context for what they're learning, which will make school more challenging and meaningful for the vast majority of students who neither excel nor are struggling.”

He said that at least 45 high school students took part in vocationally oriented classes each semester last year through the community college at discounted tuition rates.

“All of these skills will enable students to increase their value in the competitive work environment and find good jobs in needed fields in the Kalispell area,” Unterreiner said.

Great Falls leaders such as Chamber of Commerce President Teresa Olds; Tom Kotynski, school district work force development facilitator; and Heidi Pasek, interim MSU-Great Falls associate dean, said a program similar to Kalispell's could spur greater interest in classes here and help the community train

more skilled workers in needed construction-, medical- and business-related fields.



Doney

That, in turn, could attract better paying jobs to Great Falls, said GFDA President Brett Doney.

“We're all working together to transition the Great Falls economy to become more diversified, with higher wages,” he said. “Our ability to do so will be greatly influenced by developing more workers with the right skills.”

Doney added that the availability of a skilled work force is an important factor in business relocation decisions.

“For those reasons, the development authority strongly supports the combined effort by

education and business leaders to develop this critically important program,” Doney said.

“I'm so excited about what cooperation by business and education groups could mean for both the education of our kids and development of skilled workers,” Olds said. She added that that key players will meet this week to start discussing how the Kalispell program's ideas might work in Great Falls.

Kotynski said that Great Falls business groups, the Job Service,

labor unions, the school district and MSU-Great Falls all have good vocational programs for students, but they lack the unified approach and business

donations of time and money that is working in Kalispell.

“The programs are designed

to improve educational cooperation and stanch the increasing shortage of workers in key areas,” he said.

Pasek said MSU-Great Falls officials find the program appealing because it makes it easier for students to gain the technical training they need to succeed while helping the community develop training programs to fill critically needed professions.

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