

Team effort drives Work Ready bid

By Erin Schmitt
Messenger Staff Writer
eschmitt@the-messenger.com

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Hopkins County is looking to become a Kentucky Certified Work Ready Community.

Meeting all the requirements for this distinction will be challenging, but one educators and county officials are pursuing in an effort to attract potential employers.

"To be a Work Ready community will be very important to the economic development of Hopkins County and add to the quality of life in our community," said Dr. Judy Rhoads, the president of Madisonville Community College.

Judge-Executive Donnie Carroll, Madisonville Mayor David Jackson, Economic Development President Gerald Cook and the Chamber of Commerce have all endorsed the initiative.

The county hopes to submit an application for certification to the Kentucky Work Ready Communities review panel by June 27, said Rhoads.

The state certification sets specific goals that have to be met either prior to application or within three years, she said.

There are six criteria for becoming a work force ready community: graduation rates, national career readiness certificate holders, community commitment, educational attainment, soft skills measurement and availability of the Internet as an indicator of digital literacy.

The judge-executive's office has a project in place to address the Internet criteria, but each of the other five criteria are being studied in committees to help gather data and offer solutions to improve in all areas, she said.

The committees, in turn, report to the project's work task force.

"The committee chairs have done a great job," Rhoads said. "They looked in depth at what's already going on and given great ideas on what to do."

Graduation Rates Committee

The committee is looking at reasons why students may not be on track to graduate in four years, said chairman Jason Clark, who is also Hopkins County Schools director of secondary education and assessment.

When a student drops out of school, he or she must fill out an exit survey, Clark explained. The surveys include a list of reasons they are leaving school.

Looking over the data, Clark said his committee found that 42 of the 48 students who dropped out during the current school year did not participate in an extracurricular activity.

"That is a bit troubling," he said. "It just confirms what we've always known. The key to students staying in school is making them feel like they are part of something."

There were 14 students who said they had failed classes and that was the primary reason to drop out, Clark said. Twenty-one of the students had more than 20 absences in a year, and 35 had been suspended.

"The traditional reasons why students aren't staying in school is bearing out in our data," Clark said. "Now as a committee, we have to come up with a plan for students to stay in school and graduate in four years."

There are programs established like School Counts!, but the committee will be gauging their effectiveness, he said. Getting students invested and interested in school is also an imperative.

The goal is to meet and exceed the graduation rate requirement of 82.32 percent to achieve certification.

Dawson Springs High School is at 72.22 percent, Hopkins County Central High School is at 83.21 percent and Madisonville-North Hopkins High School is at 87.25 percent.

Clark said his committee meets again in a few weeks to draft a proposal to submit with the application in June.

National Career Readiness Certificate

The National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) is an ACT-sponsored test consisting of reading, applied math and location for information questions, said committee co-chairman Mike Davenport, director of the community and economic development department at MCC.

The certification meets the requirements for about 75 percent of all industries in the United States. This means that for all but 25 percent of employers, the NCRC meets the hiring requirements industries need for basic employees, Davenport said.

Kentucky has adopted the test, and as a result, every county must show that 15 percent of adults between the ages of 18-64 have received certification.

"We've got a long way to go," he said. "We're nowhere near that."

Hopkins County needs 5,000 adults certified in the next three years but has only 324.

The key to raising the number is getting as many industries and businesses in the area as possible to adopt the NCRC as a required skills measurement tool for employees, he said.

The committee has asked several businesses to do just that and haven't gotten any commitments yet but have spoken to several that are interested, Davenport said.

The test costs money, so the committee is also looking for grants to ensure businesses and their potential employees would not foot the cost, he said.

Besides industries, the committee is also looking to make it a requirement for high school seniors, those graduating from the community college, and unemployed people to take the test.

Community Commitment

Getting publicity for the project and educating the public is a key component to the community commitment committee, said chair Joyce Riggs, MCC's public relations coordinator.

The committee plans to reach out to the media like print and radio, as well as on social networks like Facebook and YouTube to get the word out, she said. In turn, that should help other committees move forward in the goals.

"It bleeds into all areas of that in just getting the support of the community behind the project," Riggs said.

The committee has also sought and received commitments from economic development, elected officials, educators, work force development, businesses and industries.

On the application submission, it must be shown that there has been a true collaboration and progress toward achieving strategic goals that bring together education, work force, economic development and elected leadership.

Riggs said the committee has recorded documentation of progress, including the minutes of meetings to submit to the review panel.

Educational Attainment

This committee's goal is to ensure that at least 25 percent of adults 18-64 have at least a two-year degree, said co-chairman Jay Parrent, MCC's dean of student affairs.

Within three years, the figure must jump to 32 percent to meet the Kentucky average and to 39 percent to meet the national average.

"Our numbers look promising now when we look at that," Parrent said. "We think we have a fairly high percentage."

One report indicates that 20.5 percent of the county's adults have a two-year degree, but Parrent said the committee is studying if that data is accurate. They are checking the 2010 census to find out the latest percentage.

There are several programs in place to help people obtain two-year degrees, including MCC's work force transition program. This program takes professionals who are trained at their place of employment by the college's work force solution department and recruit them for classes that lead to a degree.

MCC also has a joint admissions program with Murray State University, Parrent said. The committee also plans to target people who have 45 hours of college credit, but no degree.

"We feel really good about what we have in place," Parrent said. "We've got some great ideas, and we are really focused on those adults who have hours to try to come back and finish their degrees."

Soft Skills

People have different definitions of what soft skills are, but the committee has identified them as attendance, punctuality, professionalism, dress, attitude, teamwork, cooperation and critical thinking skills, said chair Dr. Susan Edington.

Edington also oversees Madisonville Early Childhood and Elementary Education for Murray State University.

"It seems to be regardless if you have an advanced degree, employers are saying that graduates are missing the particular qualities they want," she said. "So these are the things we are looking at."

Soft skills are hard to address because they encompass so many areas, Edington said. However, the committee has found that local employers are using similar soft skills training.

While they were similar, they are not connected, so the committee will look to pull resource ideas and address social skills on a more global level, Edington said.

The county must show evidence of a soft skills program or progress for both secondary and postsecondary schools in its certificate application.

School Counts! serves as a way to promote soft skills for high school students. There is also a career fair planned in May that should expose soft skills to the general population.