

In Centre County, business and education are joining forces to address local workforce needs

By Lesley Kistner

With the goal of building a better local and regional workforce, the Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County and the county's educational leaders have joined forces to begin addressing the workforce needs of employers across industry sectors.

CentreREADY is a collaborative workforce preparedness initiative designed to better match Centre County employers with employees who possess the desired core (“soft”) skills and competencies needed to fuel a 21st century workforce.



A CBICC/Community Partner Initiative

between the CBICC and the leaders of Centre County's five public school districts — Bald Eagle Area School District; Bellefonte Area School District; Penns Valley Area School District; Philipsburg-Osceola Area School District; and State College Area School District — and the two career/technical institutions — Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology and South Hills School of Business & Technology. [Additional community

partners include the Private Industry Council of the Central Corridor, and PA CareerLink® Centre County.]

After spending several months discussing the scope of the initiative with education leaders, the group formally launched *CentreREADY* in September 2018, signing a formal Memorandum of Agreement to ink the partnership.

In implementing *CentreREADY*, the educational institutions pledge to provide 21st century workforce skills experiences as part of their curriculum offerings in their respective institutions, focusing on six specific core attributes identified by employers as essential for their employees to possess. Those six attributes are:

- Communications (written, verbal, interpersonal)
- Critical thinking/problem solving
- Understanding supervision/world of work
- Tactfulness/manners
- Work ethic
- Teamwork

Penns Valley Area School District Superintendent Dr. Brian Griffith said education leaders, like their business counterparts, believe these attributes to be the key characteristics of every individual student's future success.



CBICC President and CEO Vern Squier, CCE, PaCCE, said *CentreREADY* represents a true community response to an issue that impacts business competitiveness now and into the future.

The initiative is the result of proactive outreach to local companies by the CBICC's Business and Industry Partnership Committee in an effort to help foster opportunities for and resolve challenges to growth.

The local workforce skills gap was a common concern. Specifically, the CBICC found that core skills and technical skills were often cited as lacking in the local workforce, mirroring employer concerns nationwide.

“The CBICC was resolved to respond to the workforce needs of employers here, to find ways in which the community could begin to address the issue,” Squier stressed.

Collaboration between business, education key to *CentreREADY's* success

Squier said buy-in and support from the county's educational institutions was essential to the success of the initiative, so a partnership was formed

Skills Gaps in the Centre County Workforce



Source: CBICC Business & Industry Partnership

“We recognize that there are unique skills necessary to be successful in certain jobs,” Griffith said. “As educators, we also know that absent soft skills, our students far too often fail to be successful.”

How it works

Students can enroll in *CentreREADY* through their school guidance counselor or academic advisor. Each educational institution has flexibility in assessing proficiency in the core skills based on their own curriculum offerings and experiences. It’s the *CentreREADY* designation and its emphasis on the six core attributes that resonate with employers.

For students who sign up for *CentreREADY*, earning the designation will be akin to earning the local business community’s seal of approval. When Centre County employers see the *CentreREADY* designation on job applications or resumes they will know that the applicant possesses an understanding of and proficiency in the core attributes that businesses find essential in employees.

To that end, Squier said promoting the value and purpose of *CentreREADY* certification, and maintaining a database of individuals obtaining the designation, is a priority for the Chamber and community partners and an essential part of the initiative.

Business weighs in

Squier said local and area businesses are embracing *CentreREADY*.

“The concern over having the workforce needed to grow and expand, and to remain competitive, is top of mind for many employers. They are receptive to efforts at the national, state and local level to address workforce readiness and close the skills gap because it ultimately matters to their bottom line and survival,” he said.

eLoop LLC President and CEO Ned Eldridge is among the employers in Centre County that is welcoming the initiative.



Signing the CentreREADY Memorandum of Understanding were CBICC President Vern Squier; Penns Valley Area School District Superintendent Dr. Brian Griffith; and Bellefonte Area School District Superintendent Dr. Michelle Saylor.

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With locations in State College and Pittsburgh, eLoop LLC offers a full range of IT Asset Management, data security and electronics recycling services.

“My business wasn’t around 15 years ago, so the skills you need to operate in our operation are skills that are acquired,” he explained. “But teaching some of the softer points like work ethic, attitude, how do you act around managers, things like that are very important. I’m very excited to see (*CentreREADY*) get off the ground.”

Scott Good, president and CEO of Goodco Mechanical, added, “We can teach the skills necessary to succeed in the HVAC and plumbing fields. What Goodco Mechanical appreciates and looks for in its team members are individuals who possess strong core skills.”

Joe Shulman, CEO, Hotel State College & Co., said workplace experience is no longer the primary qualifier for employment at his establishments.

“The important factors we now look at in the ideal candidate have shifted to someone who is passionate with a great work ethic, understands the world of work, and embraces teamwork. With these traits, individuals interested in the hospitality industry will fit seamlessly into our corporate culture.”

The CBICC and its education and community partners say with a focus on core skills and primarily students entering the workforce upon graduation, *CentreREADY*

program is a first, but crucial step in the process of building the workforce of the future. ■

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