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Education & Workforce Development

Help students make the connection between learning and work



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In this week's Thought Leadership Point of View, Project Lead The Way President and CEO Dr. David Dimmett discusses the importance of engaging students by showing them how what they learn in the classroom is relevant to their future careers.

Q: Students can't learn and get prepared for life and career if they are not in school. What can be done to address chronic absenteeism in K12 education?

David Dimmett: Many students see school and the educational experience as irrelevant and disconnected from the world around them. Data shows that in the aftermath of the pandemic, there were significant increases in rates of chronic absenteeism. It nearly doubled. Improved student engagement is a major factor in addressing this issue. One of the best ways to get students to school is to make learning more relevant for them.

Q: How do you see Computer Science/STEM taking more of a prevalent role in PreK-12 education and the workforce in Indiana?

David Dimmett: Computer Science touches virtually every aspect of modern life, and it is essential that students and educators are equipped to navigate their way through it. Helping educators and students learn the basics of Computer Science has become a focal point in K-12 education, but it must go beyond the basics. If we want to transform how K-12 education engages with Computer Science concepts and principles, we'll need an approach that provides real-world exposure and application to empower and support our students and teachers.

Q: How is work-based learning being incorporated more into teaching and learning?

David Dimmett: We have an opportunity to rethink work-based learning in Indiana and beyond. We now have tools and technology that allow access and opportunity for more students to be engaged at earlier phases of their K-12 experience in real-world, work-based learning.

Today we can remove barriers to internships/externships by embracing student opportunities that model the frameworks and digital platforms that business and industry use every day. Virtual, work-based learning experiences open opportunities to students in all community types and also ease access for employers. The economy that our K-12 students will

be a part of will look different than it does today. We can prepare students to thrive in that space by engaging in new and innovative work-based learning.

Q: How can education and industry partner to provide better support to students and teachers across the state?

David Dimmett: Educators and business leaders need to collaborate to provide experiential learning opportunities for students. This can start small with options like classroom visits, mentoring, project judging, and site visits to local industries. It is important for schools and industry to simply connect and begin collaboration so students can understand the types of jobs and careers that are available in their area. This is particularly important with the ever-changing technological landscape. Being able to see real-world jobs first-hand gives students earlier exposure to careers they may not otherwise know about. Additionally, better connecting schools and local industry allows students to see how what they're learning in the classroom can be applied outside of school. This gives students an important connection to their community.

Q: What are the best opportunities for strengthening education and workforce development in 2024 and beyond?

David Dimmett: The best opportunity to strengthen workforce development is to provide actual work-based learning opportunities for students while they are still in high school. Additionally, it is important for educators to have externship experiences so they can bring that knowledge back to their classrooms. Teachers are often the most important adult in a student's life when it comes to learning about careers and post-secondary opportunities. By equipping teachers with experiences and resources to help them succeed in this area, students will gain the confidence they need to pursue careers they may not have been interested in or aware of previously. Finally, family and parent nights at industry locations are a good way to connect in the community and help families understand the future of work.

Q: What opportunities do Indiana students have available to them to be better prepared for the workforce?

David Dimmett: Students in Indiana have many opportunities available to them to be better prepared for the workforce. The Indiana Department of Education recently recognized several schools with the Excellence in Next Level Educational Experiences and Opportunities grant. We are seeing more Indiana schools helping students apply what they are learning in the classroom to solve real problems in their communities. Indiana also has some amazing career and technical education programs. PLTW has incredible partners that continue to help serve Indiana students by providing grant opportunities, access to relevant content, and exposure to various STEM careers. Community partnerships between schools and industry partners such as Ardagh, Toyota, Arconic Foundation, Boston Scientific, and more help build local STEM ecosystems that connect

education to industry, thereby providing students with more access to local site visits, workshops, and internship opportunities. Connections like this can help students determine their next step after high school. Part of the skills students take away from PLTW and similar experiences are the development of important professional and durable skills that will help them in life and career. ●

Dimmett is president and CEO of Project Lead The Way, a mission-driven organization that equips PreK-12 students for a STEM-driven world with teacher-empowered curriculum in computer science, engineering, biomedical science, and more. Dimmett joined PLTW more than 12 years ago as leader of the Impact and Engagement teams. Dimmett previously served as the Chief Academic Officer of the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp. in Southwest Indiana. He has nearly 30 years of experience in education.

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