

Vocational Education is alive and well in our schools - Joseph T. Conaway, Chairperson, SEDAC

One of the best kept secrets in our public schools is the amount of vocational education programs available to our young people at this time. To the uninformed, one could form the opinion that the only programs presently available to the youth of Sussex County are college preparatory classes. I have heard way too many times that if a youngster is not planning to go to college, the schools are just a waste of time. That is just not the case. There are eleven high school programs in Sussex County counting a charter school and a school to help disruptive students change their ways. Every one of these schools offer at least one program (Charter) to sixteen pathways (Sussex Tech) to the future that are intended to provide a student with skills that could lead to a job after high school or to additional training to be found at Delaware Tech or a four- year college. The Woodbridge School District, in conjunction with Del Tech offers an outstanding program in manufacturing skills. Seaford, Cape Henlopen and Laurel provide training in culinary skills and hospitality management. Indian River sought to offer this program but was denied this opportunity by the Department of Education. GO figure, when its high schools are located in the heart of the tourist industry! I could go on but I think that you get the point. There are programs available!!!

SEDAC, like most of you, felt that little was being done but, boy, were we wrong. We saw, however, that there were opportunities to improve this learning experience. We believed that by combining our business experiences with the school programs that maybe we could improve these programs. Through the efforts of Heath Chasanov, Superintendent of Woodbridge, we met in Bridgeville with five of the seven school districts. It was an excellent meeting and led to a follow-up meeting in Georgetown with other school personnel who are charged with running these programs. This second meeting, set up by Mark Steele, Indian River Superintendent, was our first opportunity to test SEDAC's theory that, if students are exposed to job opportunities early in high school, a career path could be chosen and a youngster could gather the skills necessary to obtain a job after high school. Towards that end, we invited what we chose to call the water and sewer industry to discuss what they look for in a job applicant that could be integrated into existing programs. The businesses included Jerry Esposito, Tidewater Utilities, Mike Collison, AC Schultes Well Drillers, David Wilkerson, Wilkerson Water Company, Kenny Niblett, the Public Works Director in Millsboro and Steve Lewandowski, Duffield Associates, engineering consultants. This lineup was designed to expose those in attendance to all levels of employment and training.

We spent time talking about the so-called "soft skills". You and I know them as coming to work on time, staying off your smart phone when you're working, a full day's work for a full day's pay, you know - what we were taught so many years ago. Both the schools and businesses agree that these soft skills are, unfortunately, missing in many of our young people and that, working together with help from parents, maybe this trend could be reversed. We shall see.

All of the businesses there made it clear that they are available to the schools in whatever capacity they wish. From visiting individual classes, to field trips to the work place and, yes, internships to start the process of finding a solution to the lack of skilled labor in Sussex, all options are on the table.

Based on the success of this first step, we intent to bring the schools together with other work opportunities, including, but not limited to, the electrical field, the poultry industry, building trades, manufacturing opportunities and the hospitality industry.

As I said in SEDAC's annual report, 2018 could be a good year.