

# ■ PATHWAYS TO PROSPERITY

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**A** pioneering Tennessee career-prep program is working to close the gap between schools and industry, enabling students to get on-the-job training in the careers their communities need.

While today's graduates face the toughest job market in decades, companies across Tennessee are bracing to find workers skilled enough to fill the positions left by retiring Baby Boomers.

"Pathways to Prosperity addresses both issues. It allows students to gain valuable training and companies to build strong pathways for employment long-term," said Nick Hansen, the program's director at the Tennessee Department of Education.

Hansen and Assistant Commissioner for Career and Technical Education Danielle Mezera are currently working with schools, higher education institutions, and companies to establish industry-specific programs for students in Tennessee's Southeast and Upper Cumberland

regions. Middle school students in area school districts will be able to participate in pilot versions starting in the 2013-2014 school year.

"We want to make sure Tennessee's programs of study at the high school level align clearly with the needs and opportunities in our state, allowing both students and their communities to be successful," said Mezera. "Through this network, schools will make more, stronger connections with community leaders, businesses, and industries in their areas and provide students with relevant pathways to future careers."

Pathways to Prosperity launched in Tennessee and five other states in 2012, in collaboration with national education nonprofit Jobs for the Future and Harvard University's Graduate School of Education.

The network builds on existing Career and Technical Education programs across the state and supports efforts by Governor Bill Haslam and the Tennessee Department of Educa-

tion to improve postsecondary readiness among Tennessee graduates.

In the growing industrial centers in Southeast Tennessee, Hamilton County is looking to set up an advanced manufacturing pathway after preliminary conversations with industry leaders at Volkswagen, which operates a Chattanooga plant.

In the rural Upper Cumberland region, there are a range of pathways being established across industries, including health science and information technology as well as pre-engineering and advanced manufacturing. In Putnam, Jackson, White, and Overton counties, the regional economic initiative Highlands of Tennessee has taken an active role bringing in community partners including Vol State and Tennessee Tech.

Pathways to Prosperity involves more than just having a company host a field trip or set up a booth at a career fair. University and technical center partners, as well as the companies themselves, have a say in shaping the classroom curriculum and offer students opportunities such as job shadowing, internships, and on-the-job training so they can earn industry-specific credentials.

These regional Pathways to Prosper-

ity initiatives make up what will be a growing network across Tennessee, combining rigorous academics with strong technical education in fields that their communities need most.

The need to better prepare today's graduates is dire. This generation has been hit harder by unemployment in the recession than its parents and grandparents, and Tennessee recognizes that the education system needs to do more to give students strong foundational skills as well as technical experience that many of today's jobs require.

Haslam visited with employers and educators across Tennessee earlier this year to emphasize the need to connect skills being taught in classrooms to the needs of employers.

"If we are going to be a state that attracts companies to locate and grow here, a state that keeps its best and brightest graduates here with good-paying, high-quality jobs, there is nothing more important we can do than to focus on education," Haslam said in a press release announcing his administration's focus on postsecondary education. "There is a lot of consensus around K-12 education-reform efforts, and I think we have the opportunity to become a national model in approaching postsecondary education as well." ■

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