

BUSINESS

Why employers should care about future of 'extra' curriculums

By Kari Denissen Cunnien | MARCH 27, 2017 — 5:25AM

At age 14, I spent the summer in a community theater production of "South Pacific." From that moment on I spent every waking moment outside of school in theater or traveling the state for speech competitions.

Today, I use those skills I learned in confidence, teamwork and public speaking every day when I show up for work.

My after-school experiences set me up for success. But not all young people have opportunities like this.

Income plays a big role in it. Higher-income families spend nearly \$9,000 annually while lower-income families spend about \$1,300 each year on after-school and summer learning opportunities.

Whether it's community theater, robotics leagues, music lessons or coding camps, these opportunities matter. They play a critical role in developing young adults who are ready and able to contribute to their future employers' successes.

What employers want, what kids need

Every year Forbes reports on the skills employers most desire in their new hires. Not surprisingly, topping the 2015 list were degrees in business, engineering and computer/information sciences.

But what was surprising was the top three skills employers seek regardless of majors or degrees: ability to work in a team structure; ability to make decisions and solve problems (tie); and ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization.

Technical skills didn't even show up until No. 7 on the list.

Fast-forward two years, and the most recent Forbes reporting on this topic shows this trend continuing. In 2017 Forbes surveyed more than 100 top HR managers, recruiters and CEOs about the most important skills for entry-level job seekers, and nearly all of them put social-emotional skills at the top the list.

That's right: leadership, communication, collaboration. That's what employers want.

And that's where after-school programs come in.

After-school programs are intentionally focused on helping young people develop skills like self-confidence, teamwork, stress management, empathy, and responsibility — skills that have been shown to be more important than IQ for success in the labor market.

Take, for example, BrookLynk, a summer internship program for youth ages 14-21 in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. Young people start with trainings on topics like networking, professional etiquette and résumé building. Then they can apply for paid summer internships across many career fields. BrookLynk staff coach the youths and employer throughout, helping young people successfully navigate their first real-world job experiences.

BrookLynk is just one of many after-school programs in Minnesota that are preparing youth for success.

A winning equation

Young people spend 20 percent of their time in school building a foundation in reading, writing and arithmetic. That foundation in technical and information-based skills is absolutely critical.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1490397027778/;
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Graco played host to its first Manufacturing Day last fall to encourage hands-on jobs as a path to middle class. Among those...

But to really ensure a winning equation, all young people need opportunities to build skills during their discretionary time as well.

That means investing in strong schools and quality after-school experiences.

Minnesota needs a STEM-ready workforce

Science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) jobs are expected to grow 17 percent by 2018 while non-STEM occupations will grow only 9.8 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Minnesota's workforce is struggling to meet the need. Minnesota companies like 3M, Medtronic, Cargill, Ecolab and others are depending on a pipeline of talent to stay competitive.

Earlier this month, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and STEM Next released a study focused on STEM-based after-school programs.

They surveyed youths from more than 160 after-school programs across 11 states and found a dramatic link between after-school and interest in STEM:

- 80 percent of students reported a positive gain in their science career knowledge.
- 78 percent experienced a positive change in their self-reported interest in science.
- 73 percent reported an increase in "STEM identity" — a personal belief that he/she can do well and succeed at science.

Minnesota needs to create a STEM-ready workforce, and after-school is part of the solution.

This fall Ignite Afterschool launched the Afterschool STEM Learning Community. This first-of-its-kind collaborative brings together 16 diverse programs from across our state to intentionally embed STEM into after-school and get more young Minnesotans excited about STEM careers.

Twin Cities Housing Development Corporation is part of that effort.

In the past two years, they have implemented two new after-school STEM programs at Liberty Plaza specifically targeting low-income youth of color who lack equitable access to STEM learning opportunities.

David Browne, manager of program development noted, "Our workforce is already dominated by jobs that require STEM knowledge and skills. We don't want the children we serve to be left behind by an unnecessary education and skills gap. This gap does not have to develop. Children, families, communities, the state, and the country cannot afford that."

High-quality educational experiences and after-school programs where they can develop skills like leadership, communication and problem-solving — that's what young people need to be successful.

And, ultimately, that's what businesses need too.

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