

The Herald-Sun

Durham businesses take the lead in preparing youth for the workforce

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Meredythe Holmes, executive director of Made in Durham, talks with participants in the YouthWork Internship Program, which offers youth ages 14-24 the opportunity to gain work experience and develop skills while connecting with jobs.

DURHAM -- Over the past few years, 40 students from Durham Public Schools got hands-on training repairing used electronics thanks to a free program hosted by Triangle Recycling, a social enterprise that collects, refurbishes and recycles end-of-life computers and other electronics, commonly known as ewaste.

Students received training in repairing computers while also learning about the environmental and humanitarian issues surrounding ewaste and about sustainable business models. The refurbished computers were given to charity and sold locally and online at below-market prices to help bridge the Digital Divide and support the program.

“There is a huge role for small business to play in hands-on training,” says Triangle Recycling owner Larry Herst. “The unfortunate budget cutbacks affecting Durham Public School students has made it all the more important for businesses to step up and provide assistance in training and job readiness. This doesn’t always mean writing a check.”

Herst is one of a growing number of Durham companies offering opportunities for high school students to participate in work-based learning experiences, which research shows play a key role in moving students from education to careers.

A recent report, "The Silent Epidemic," found that nearly half (47 percent) of dropouts aged 16-24 surveyed say they dropped out because classes were not interesting. Of those, 69 percent said they were not motivated because they felt school was not relevant to what they would need to be successful in life.

Work-based learning helps make that school-life connection, providing opportunities for students to apply what they learn in the classroom to a real-life business environment. It can take the form of internships, apprenticeships, workplace simulations, student-led enterprises, classroom tours and field trips to tour private and nonprofit companies. It also encompasses various learning styles and provides occasions for problem-solving and demonstrating acquired skills in an authentic setting. Educators and workforce development leaders rely on employers' expertise on industry standards to help define work-based learning curricula content and to set the measures for job readiness.

In Durham, Herst and other local employers help provide those experiences through the Durham YouthWork Internship Program, which offers youth ages 14-24 the opportunity to gain work experience and develop skills while connecting with jobs in government agencies, nonprofits and local businesses. The program is a partnership of the City of Durham, Durham County, Durham Public Schools, Durham Workforce Development Board and Raleigh-Durham Electrical Joint Apprenticeship Training Council focused on helping move students from school to careers.

"Too many young people who grow up in Durham are not competitive in the Triangle's education and labor market," says Dr. Victor Dzau, former CEO of the Duke University Medical Center, now president of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Sciences and chairman of Made in Durham. Made in Durham is a community partnership of business, government, educators and nonprofits working to ensure that every Durham youth graduates from high school, completes a postsecondary credential and enters a career by age 25.

Moving youth to careers is a win-win-win, says Dzau. Youth gain meaningful employment, businesses gain a strong workforce and the community prospers.

Lydia Newman is Durham Futures Coordinator for Made in Durham. For more information about the organization, visit <http://www.mdcinc.org/projects/made-durham>.