

Trips to Detroit Diesel, MPLX emphasize need for partnership between Noble Local School District and Business Advisory Council

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The Business Advisory Council has become a valuable partnership for the Noble Local School District, providing a direct pathway for the students of the district to enter the workforce ready to contribute.

With some 55-plus business and industry partners in the BAC along with State Representative Don Jones, Lieutenant Governor Jon Husted's assistant, Brynn Stepp, and Noble County Commissioners Ty Moore and Brad Peoples, it's become apparent that working together to plan for the future has become an essential part of the education process.

"When we hear them, we're trying to make changes in our curriculum to address what they need," said Noble Local Superintendent Dan Leffingwell. "We talk about kids being our customers, but the area businesses are our customers, too, because we need to create a graduate with the skills necessary to fill their employment needs.

"Our challenge is to think about those skills that are transferable across multiple careers," he continued. "Just like they do, we run a test and when we recognize there's a flaw or a problem, we develop ways to avoid or address similar failures in the future."

There are many similarities between the business and industry processes and those we use with our students, according to Leffingwell.

"The first thing educators want to say is 'kids are different...we're not manufacturing a kid,'" he stated. "That's true, but there still needs to be a process in place where students are assessed and countermeasures are developed.."

Area businesses wanting to expand or establish themselves in southeastern Ohio will rely heavily on the local education system going forward, according to Leffingwell.

"The reality is the best hope for our future is to develop this region," he said. "They can't grow the area without showing future investors that they can supply a workforce, so sometimes I'm irritated that other educators aren't engaged to the level that we are, as together we could provide that workforce.

"We are the key to the economic development in the future of our region," he continued. "The reality is that just us (Noble Local) with 200-plus kids is not enough and education's failure to retool to address the workforce needs to be addressed."

As part of the tie-in with the BAC, Noble Local administrators and teachers have taken the approach that they want to hear directly from the businesses and actually get a first-hand look at what goes on.

With that in mind, two busloads from the NLDS recently spent a day at two close-to-home facilities, with one stop at Detroit Diesel Remanufacturing Corporation located between Cambridge and Byesville and the other at Marathon Petroleum Logistics (MPLX), formerly known as MarkWest Energy Partners, which is right in the district's backyard in Summerfield.

Detroit Diesel: All Engines Go

Production Team Manager Greg Forshey, a 1991 Shenandoah High graduate and a member of the Business Advisory Council, pointed out that there are two primary components to working at DD.

"The main things we're looking for in employees are to pass a drug test and show up for work," he said. "Work ethic is huge.

"Another thing we look for is being able to work with one another," he continued. "We have a lot of teams, so it's not just working on an individual basis.

"As far as education is concerned, mathematics is needed for the engineering positions, but we have welders, CNC operators, shop floor associates to assemble piece and plenty more," Forshey added.

"There is a job for everyone," he noted. "You don't have to have a four-year college degree or a trade to work here, and once you're in the building, we offer tuition reimbursement for students (\$4,000 per semester paid up front) who want to gather more information."

Michael Chalfont, who served as one of the tour guides for the Noble Local contingent, pointed out that while technology continues to be integrated into facilities like Detroit Diesel to improve production, they're not taking people's jobs because employees are still needed to run the machines.

As a life-long Zep, Forshey was quick to note the number of SHS grads who work at Detroit Diesel.

"We have maybe 15 to 20 Shenandoah graduates working here right now, ranging from just out of school to long-time employees," he said.

Attracting younger employees is essential to the future of the company, according to Forshey.

"It's imperative with our aging workforce that we get new people coming in," he said. "The young workforce now is so different. They would rather find multiple jobs for a small amount of time rather than find a company to work for that they will eventually retire from.

"It's sad, and we're trying to fight that battle," he added.

He's also very pleased with the interest Noble Local has shown in developing a partnership with Detroit Diesel.

"I'm very excited and the company is, too," he said. "I'm not only a Shenandoah graduate, but I've lived in this area all my life and I know the workforce is evolving, and it's very important that the area schools continue to monitor what the companies need and involve the students.

"Shenandoah has really been the one to step up and connect on a one-on-bases with our HR (human resources) or the operations folks," he said proudly. "They're always pushing and want to know more and more and we appreciate that. They're educating the parents, too, with the opportunities that are available."

MPLX: A Pipeline to the Future

The 100-acre gas processing facility in Summerfield not only offers local employment, but provides the Noble Local School District with a much-needed and much-appreciated increase in school funding due to being located within the district. The enthusiasm and sense of pride of Ernie Wells - a Caldwell High graduate who served as the tour guide at MPLX - left everyone on the NLSD buses thoroughly impressed.

"I had the opportunity to come here and this is the very first time I've been able to work in Noble County; be paid in Noble County and live in Noble County," he said, noting that he previously worked in coal mines, in management and ran a tractor dealership. "I'm only a few years away from retirement. so it couldn't have come at a better time."

Wells said that having employees who are part of the local community is the company's goal.

"One hundred percent of our workforce lives within an hour of here and 80 percent are within a half-hour, so it's a lot of local boys and girls and those that aren't, we're considering adopting them!" he emphasized.

"There are so many professions available within this 100 or so acre field that are wide-open to the educational industry for our local schools," Wells said. "If there are students interested in I&E (instrumentation and electrical) or students interested in working out in the fields, they can be employed here and keep us alive.

"Our desire is to train our own local people that have the expertise so we don't have to pay for motels and flight arrangements or be put on a waiting list when we have these very important needs," he added.

Available positions at MPLX include operators, maintenance, I&E, maintenance planners, office administrators, environment and safety coordinators, measurement techs, engineers and project managers, IT, human resources and more.

"We need to be competitive and maintain our product to have the highest return on the product as possible both for the landowners and producers alike can capitalize and have their checks be as big as possible," said Wells, who was quick to point out that the local facility offers a safe working environment.

"How safe?" he asked. "I would rather work here seven days a week than I would drive to Columbus on a Saturday to see a football game! That's how confident I feel about it.

"We're treated very well and we're paid very well," he added, "and we take pride in keeping this a clean, well-run facility."

Wells also said the MPLX employees have a "you are your brother's keeper" mentality.

"It's nice to know a lot of us are local and we know each-other," he said. "We have a vested interest in our families and want to continue that legacy for generations to come. Hopefully we can maintain the ability to educate our local kids and keep them here so they can take over their family farms, stay close to grandmother and have placed like this owned and operated by big companies.

"The company supports the Noble County Fair and the amount has been increased this year," he said, "and to be a part of that is very humbling and very exciting."

Wells' sentiments were echoed by Tina Rush, the Local Government Affairs Representative at MPLX.

“This industry is fairly new to this area and we have seen a lot of the local higher education institutions coming on board,” she said. “More specifically the two-year college more so than the four-year ones.

“Preparation of the workforce is a joint effort,” Rush continued. “Just like they say ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, it’s the same thing for us to get this workforce ready so it’s the part of the industry working with the educators and collaborating for the common good to get the students prepared for the future.”

Rush also revealed that Noble County will get an additional benefit from MPLX this year.

“Starting this school year (2019-2020), one graduating senior from Noble County will be receiving a scholarship,” she said. “It’s to any graduating senior in Noble County with an emphasis on someone going into a STEM field, specifically this industry, and can be used on anything from a certificate program all the way up to a degree program.”

MPLX has proven to be a valuable community partner in the county as well, with the list of community involvement including: Clean-up of Farley Park including rebuilding the baseball field and clean-up of the walking trail; donation of signs to Summerfield; adoption of two miles of Route 78; purchase of animals at the Noble County Fair and the donation of processed meat to local food banks; donation of pool furniture at the Caldwell pool; sponsorship of various local youth sports; and donations to the Summerfield, Belle Valley and Lewisville Volunteer Fire Departments.