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IGNITE Pathways Opening Doors to Career Opportunities

Federal investment helps Woodbine facility offer unique approach to learning

WOODBINE- Exposure to career pathways can often be difficult for students to find or relate to in a traditional classroom setting. IGNITE Pathways, an arm of the Woodbine Community School District, is striving to open doors to career exploration for students across the region.

The career and technical education program is housed in a state-of-the-art 45,000 sq ft facility next door to the Woodbine CREW Center recreation facility. The IGNITE program originally started in the CREW Center in 2021 until the separate building was opened in August of 2023. Southwest Iowa Planning Council (SWIPCO) helped IGNITE Pathways obtain a \$1.8 million US Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant, which IGNITE Pathways matched another \$1.3 million, to purchase equipment for the new facility in 2022. Now that the facility has been running for a couple years, its impact is starting to bloom.

Based in Atlantic, SWIPCO serves an 8-county region in Southwest Iowa and is designated by the federal government as an Economic Development District. This designation and the planning and development work SWIPCO does makes the region eligible for various types of funding that supports job creation.

Director Michelle Barry said, “We’re truly changing students’ lives by giving them opportunities they may have never had otherwise. Whether it’s getting them on a path to a two-year program, a four-year university, post-secondary training, or into a job where they feel confident and successful—none of that would be possible at this scale without this facility.”

IGNITE offers 9th-12th Grade Pathways in numerous fields, a 7th-8th Grade Spark Academy, work-based learning, core credit courses, adult learning, educator training/workshops, and so much more. The pathway courses explore realms like aviation, nursing, agriculture, athletic performance, welding, HVAC, automotive technology, engineering, computer programming, criminal justice, early childhood education, cosmetology, and the list continues. Many of these courses have top-notch simulators and equipment that were funded through the EDA grant.



Barry is a native of Woodbine and thought that she would never move back. Now getting to be a part of this program she feels like it was meant to be, “This experience brings clarity—it feels like this work was meant to be, rooted in education at its core. I truly believe we’re transforming what education can look like, and we have a team committed to that vision. It feels like we’re gaining momentum, and people are starting to feel welcome to visit, see what we’re doing, and take ideas back with them.”

Barry gave high praise to their staff and instructors, saying that they all have a strong passion for the work they do, and everyone is always willing and eager to do more. She said they never have a problem finding instructors for courses and the off-site locations have done a wonderful job running their programs

Now that they have settled in for a couple of years with their course curriculum, IGNITE Pathways has an added focus for outreach. In the 2024-25 academic year they piloted their Career Adventure Days. These days work like a field trip, allowing 2nd-12th grade students to come to the IGNITE facility and go to different career stations to learn and gain hands-on experience. These days are tailored to grade levels with Explore My Future for 2nd-5th Grades, Spark My Future for 6th-8th Grades, IGNITE My Future for 9th-12th Grades, and Career Camps for 9th-12th Grades. Barry said these Career Adventure Days “Have several benefits: 1. Enhance the college/career readiness, they have an idea of what they might want to do heading into college or even high school. 2. Get some hands-on skill, they get to see what they might have a knack for and what maybe is really hard. 3. Discover hidden interests, they didn’t know these jobs existed or what they meant. 4. Connections to core, that’s at the heart of IGNITE, we believe you don’t need to learn English, math, social studies, and science sitting in desks and rows...We are just trying to evolve and show there is a different way to let kids learn.”

Barry has started to line up these Career Adventure Days for this upcoming academic year for districts across Eastern Nebraska and Western Iowa. Any school districts that have an interest can reach out to Michelle to explore options. IGNITE Pathways can be reached at 712-647-3526 or Info@Ignite-Pathways.com

SWIPCO is always eager to be a resource for member communities to seek innovation and growth. The IGNITE Pathways project is certainly a great example of innovation in a rural community that is looking to thrive. The City of Woodbine has positioned itself well with many other projects such as a revitalized downtown, the CREW Center construction, and the Harvest Hills housing development. SWIPCO has been a proud partner in many of those projects and is always available to assist in any way possible.

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