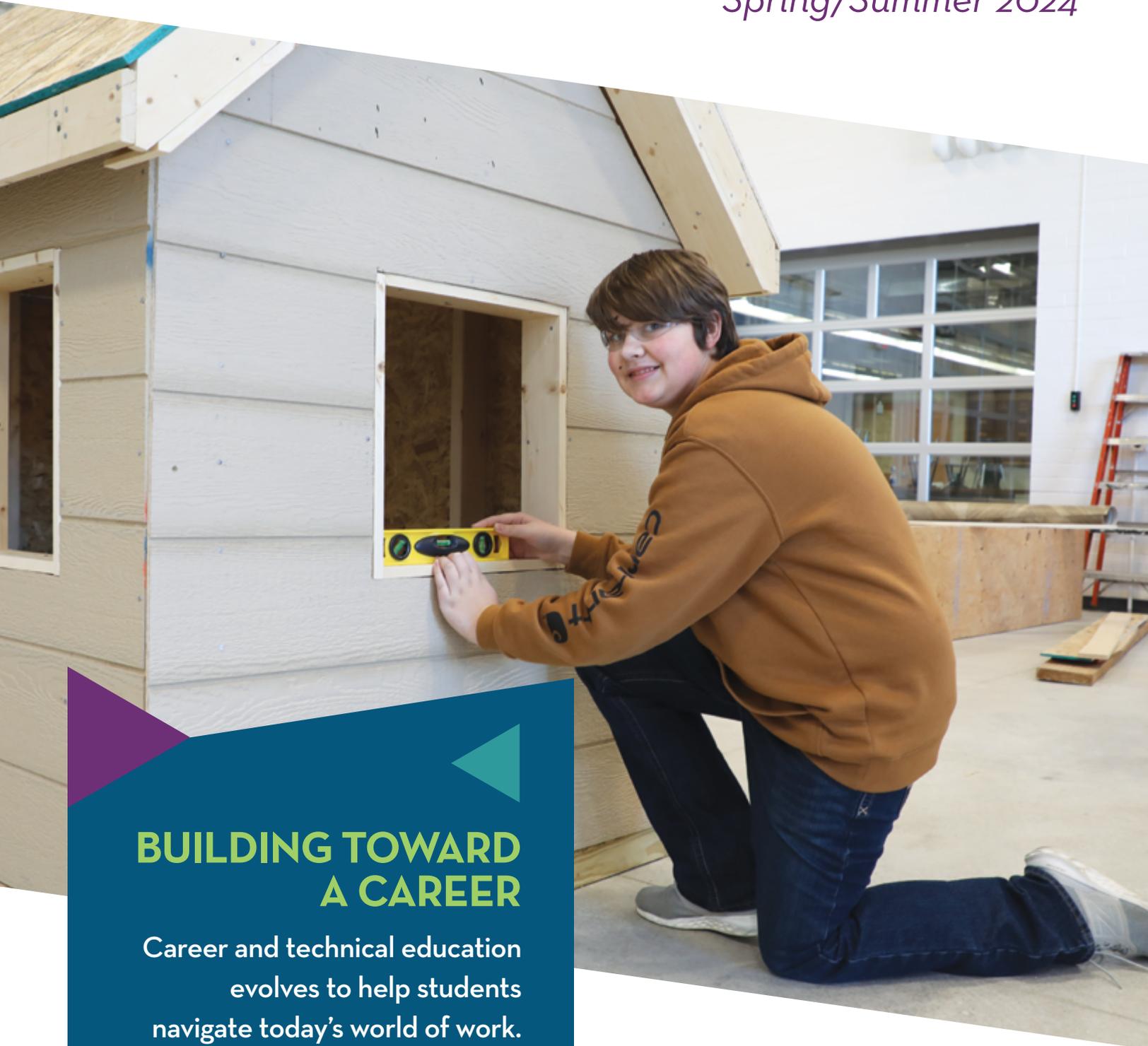


CONNECT

Spring/Summer 2024



BUILDING TOWARD A CAREER

Career and technical education
evolves to help students
navigate today's world of work.

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Pictured: Cal Lessman works in the new career and technical education space at Jackson County Central High School.



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION



ON THE RIGHT PATH

Scott Marquardt

This issue is all about career pathways. Our feature story has highlights from the vast network of partnerships around our region that are supporting our students in finding meaningful work and our employers in filling their workforce needs so that our economy and communities can thrive.

Choosing what to include was difficult because there is so much happening in career and technical education right now. Something we didn't have room to cover in the feature that I want to call out are the career exploration events in southwest Minnesota. From IGNITE Your Future in Hutchinson to Southwest Minnesota Career Expo in Worthington and Marshall, thousands of students attend these fun, interactive events that help them "try on" different jobs.

It takes hundreds of business, agency and education volunteers working together to pull it off.

Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) is proud to not only be a sponsor, but also to invest our time to support these events. More than half our staff are based at the office in Hutchinson, and each year a group volunteers at IGNITE, as well as SWIF Chief Administrative Officer Missy Maiers serving on the event's steering committee.

I'm grateful for the willingness of our team to mobilize their expertise and relationships to make multi-partner and multi-faceted convenings and projects a success. Career pathways work is not just something we fund. It's something we at SWIF as an employer – and our staff as community members and even as parents – care deeply about. As you read this issue's highlights, know that there are many more efforts underway and take the opportunity to explore what's happening in your own community.



Missy, Margie, Marie, Lori and Laura volunteer together at IGNITE Your Future at Ridgewater College in Hutchinson.

A NEW ERA OF CAREER EXPLORATION: HELPING KIDS FIND THEIR CALLING

For decades, the conversation about jobs in our region focused on how to create more of them. Nearly 40 years of job shortages built up a narrative that encouraged young people to leave their hometowns for education and careers. Now employers need them back. The vacancy rate in southwest Minnesota has been one of the highest in the state since the Great Recession.

"There's nothing in modern history to match what we're experiencing today. This is a whole new era," said Kelly Asche, senior researcher at the Center for Rural Policy and Development (CRPD) in Minnesota.

"In the past, we were talking about, 'How do we get more jobs?' Now it's, 'How do we get more people?' This is the new conversation, and this is a very different conversation," Kelly said.

Last year, Kelly and his colleagues published a report titled "The Journey to meaningful workforce participation among graduates in Southwest Minnesota." It showed that the percentage of our region's high school graduates that have meaningful workforce participation in southwest Minnesota grows quickly right after high school but settles at about 25 percent. That "meaningful workforce participation" refers to an individual employed for 1,000 or more hours with a single employer over one calendar year.

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“Geography means something. Staying local is important to southwest Minnesota workforce needs,” Kelly said. “There are not enough students attending local colleges to fill local workforce needs.”

The report also showed that the more career and technical education (CTE) courses and achievements a student had, the more likely they were to be employed in the region. Gone are the days of a single semester in a careers class. Today’s approach in southwest Minnesota is an evolving network of partners all leaning in to strengthen students’ ties to the region and open their eyes to the possibilities around them.

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CRPD outlines the strategy for success based on the findings: Introduce kids early to careers that are available locally and incentivize higher education within the region, as local college grads – especially with two-year degrees – are more likely to have local jobs.

REGIONAL APPROACH
STRENGTHENS CTE

At the heart of the network is Launch Your Future Today (LYFT) Career Pathways, launched in 2018 with a goal of rebuilding career and technical education in southwest and west-central Minnesota. LYFT promotes the “3 Es Roadmap,” leading kids through career exploration, exposure and experience.

Funding comes from a statewide Rural Career and Technical Education Consortium Grant approved by the Minnesota Legislature. Eriann Faris leads LYFT as the CTE Project Coordinator for Southwest West Central Service Cooperative.

LYFT brings together all the major players when it comes to careers: secondary education, post-secondary education, workforce development, businesses and

economic development. Its advisory committee boasts 28 members, including Scott Marquardt representing Southwest Initiative Foundation.

“The advisory committee has so much value. LYFT has 18 counties and 53 school districts. It’s insightful to hear from all these people out there who are also partnering with these same folks, living or working in the communities,” Eriann said.

Since launching, LYFT Career Pathways has funded more than 90 projects and touched the lives of more than 20,000 students in southwest and west-central Minnesota. LYFT’s power is in partnerships, focusing the work of many groups in the same direction. One example is the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council (PIC). PIC’s Youth Career Connector Program serves multiple schools, bridging the gap between business and education.

“Back in 2016 we did an asset mapping gap analysis and found that our region has a shortage of career counselors in our school districts. And in addition to that, career counselors are really stretched in many different directions and struggle to find the time to provide career services,” said Carrie Bendix, PIC Executive Director and part of the LYFT Career Pathways Advisory Committee. “We do our best to reach all school districts. We have three Youth Career Connectors and we have a team of seven in our youth program.”

Youth Career Connectors provide career assessments, provide work readiness training with school districts, help plan a



A partnership between Marshall High School and a local coffee shop received a LYFT Pathways Innovation grant to teach pre-employment skills to students, helping prepare them for independent employment and career opportunities.



“We wouldn’t be where we are today in this sort of initiative without SWIF. SWIF really helps support initiatives and bring key stakeholders together and communicate the needs and the successes for the region.” Carrie Bendix, Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council

variety of career exploration events and create colorful labor market infographics to get students thinking about the skills they may need. Recently, they’ve increased effort on work-based learning opportunities like job shadows, business tours and internships.

Last year, Youth Career Connectors worked with 28 school districts, 200 employers and 4,056 students. Southwest Initiative

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The 2023 Southwest Minnesota Career Expo at the college campuses of Southwest Minnesota State University and Minnesota West in Worthington brought 130 employers and educational programs to more than 2,122 students from 39 schools. Partners included LYFT Career Pathways, the Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council and Southwest Initiative Foundation.



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Foundation awarded a \$25,000 grant to help fund the Youth Career Connector serving Marshall, Minneota and Tracy. This grant was made possible, in part, through funding from Elwood (Woody) and Sandy Miller.

SWIF and all its funds have invested more than \$1 million in career pathways work since 2017, from sponsoring major career expos drawing hundreds of students to the purchase of welding safety equipment and funding hands-on FFA experiences.

“For us, supporting career pathways isn’t just a grant category, it’s embedded across our organization,” said Missy Maiers, SWIF Chief Administrative Officer. “We understand that thriving communities need thriving individuals, and that starts with ensuring everyone has access to meaningful career pathways.”

HUSKY PATH LEADS THE WAY TO CAREERS

Schools have stepped up their CTE offerings across the region, with some creative solutions. Jackson County Central Schools (JCC) is connected to LYFT through the advisory committee. While a lot of CTE focuses on high school students, JCC has programming aimed at its middle schoolers.

Middle school principal Chris Naumann was looking for ways to keep students motivated and interested when he piloted the idea of “Midmester,” more than a week of hands-on learning for students to try out new skills.

“Middle school is super hard. And if we can find ways to get [students] to engage in putting time and effort into schooling, it shows them that it can pay

off in the future. It’s making middle school relevant to some students,” said Principal Naumann, adding that very few behavior issues come up during Midmester.

The courses are always different, depending on what volunteers in the community are willing to teach. Generally, they fall into the categories of lifestyle; humanities; career exploration; and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Kids have tried sign language, guitars, advertising campaigns, welding, small engines, autobody, carpentry and more.

In addition to testing out skills for future careers, students build interpersonal skills and

“

Just getting around a table and talking to people is a skill that we have all lost. Getting together and playing board games, listening to some of your elders talk. We focus a lot on test scores and all the state mandates, and we have to do that, but there’s other things that make us a well-rounded individual.” Chris Naumann, JCC Middle School Principal

broaden their connections. In a recent course called “Moments to Remember,” students interviewed older adults in the community and wrote biographies.

In a school district survey, parents gave Midmester high marks. And students are eager to get first choice on the classes offered.

“Very few behavior reports ever come out during Midmester time because kids are picking classes that they want to be in and learn more about. ... It also curbs some behavior pieces that sometimes we see in school because we’re giving kids choices,” Chris said.

Midmester’s success has been followed by increased investment in career and technical education at the high school level. “Husky Path” at JCC works to ensure all young people and workers have the skills and credentials to succeed in today’s economy.

A recent open house at JCC High School celebrated completion of a \$3.5 million CTE addition and renovation project that added a construction and automotive lab, as well as updates to the existing metal lab. The project got a boost with a LYFT Innovation Grant that will better prepare students for working in the 21st-century fabrication industry. JCC, HitchDoc and AGCO Jackson Operations



Students Aiven Farmer (left) and Jamie Edlin get hands-on with career and technical education at Jackson County Central High School.

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connecting kids to the options that are available right in front of them.

“We tell our students, ‘You can be an engineer. You can be in H.R. You don’t have to leave the area,’” said JCC Schools Superintendent Barry Schmidt at the event. “We are excited about the partnerships we can build.”

“We want to help benefit an improved sense of purpose and pride in the community, and increased engagement with students,” Barry said.

Ben Spaeth is a senior at JCC and has been enjoying the new CTE shop space during his Geometry in Construction class. The class puts students in charge as architects and construction managers of a project, translating basic geometry concepts into construction skills.

“It has been really beneficial with getting some basics,” Ben said, like reading construction plans

and measurements. Plus, he appreciates the hands-on learning.

After graduation this spring, Ben plans to study carpentry at a nearby community college.

“I’ve enjoyed my time here. High school has been a good experience,” Ben said.

CEO CONNECTS STUDENTS TO COMMUNITY

In addition to space in the school to explore careers, JCC offers students experiences outside the building. One is the new Cottonwood Jackson Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) program that takes juniors and seniors from three schools, including Mountain Lake and Windom, into businesses to get an in-person look at local opportunities. They also get an individual mentor who helps guide them in real life learning experiences.

Quinn Landherr is a junior and part of the inaugural Cottonwood Jackson CEO cohort. He’s interested in a career as a chiropractor but has appreciated all the business tours – even the grain elevator, which he didn’t think he would find interesting until he got inside.

“The CEO program gives us tons of connections. It’s a great opportunity for students to experience what it’s like in the real world,” Quinn said.

There are seven CEO programs that have started in southwest Minnesota, and SWIF has supported each of them, investing \$129,760. CEO prepares kids to be responsible, enterprising individuals who become entrepreneurs or

entrepreneurial thinkers and contribute to economic development and sustainable communities.

Cottonwood Jackson CEO students have taken things a step further. Partnering with the Jackson Snow Angels, a free snow removal service serving older adults, the program is giving back to the community that supports their education. Quinn helps coordinate student volunteers during a snowfall and led the initial volunteer sign-up, recruiting more than 40 students who wanted to pitch in.

“These kids [in CEO] are absolutely the cream of our school,” said Paul Spence, who leads the Jackson Snow Angels and works with Quinn. “I don’t see any high school that shouldn’t have a program like this.”

“They’ve given us the opportunity to reach other students in our community and the connection with other age groups,” Quinn said. “We students are the future of Jackson County.”



Got an idea for career and technical education in your community?

Get in touch with Eriann Faris at eriann.faris@swwc.org or 507-537-2271.

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jointly applied for the funding to add a CNC plasma table at school, with training for students led by industry experts.

At the open house, local businesses toured the shop and learned about opportunities to be involved. Businesses can provide a student internship through work-based learning programs, offer technical assistance to CTE classes or even host a business tour.

Southwest Private Industry Council helps facilitate the partnership, and PIC Youth Program Manager Maria Peters spoke at the CTE open house.

“We serve as a liaison between the schools, the businesses and the communities,” Maria told local professionals. “We collaborate with schools and businesses to make sure we can eliminate any barriers the students may have.”

It’s about



Through Cottonwood Jackson CEO, Quinn Landherr (right) works together with Paul Spence to help schedule volunteers for the Jackson Snow Angels, a local nonprofit.



Montevideo High School's welding program shows off new helmets purchased in part with funding from the Montevideo Area Community Foundation. Pictured with the students are employees from local firm J&D Construction who teach alongside agribusiness instructor Maquelah Miner.



MONTEVIDEO AREA
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

An Affiliate of Southwest Initiative Foundation

Its mission is to inspire generosity and to promote philanthropy that benefits the Montevideo area, now and in the future.

“Every grant cycle, there’s always a good way to help put some foundation money into the schools,” said MACF Board Chair Krystal Lynne. “Knowing that the welding is a newer program, we knew that it would have a positive impact for hundreds of kids immediately and into the future.”

Montevideo High School (MHS) has more than 400 students, and CTE is offered at every grade level in the high school. Students can do job shadows, self-assessments, business tours, onsite work experiences, on-the-job training in determined career pathways, multiple levels of post-secondary education and other supported career activities. The five CTE teachers consult with industry professionals on curriculum and experiences to ensure graduates can be successful in future careers.

“Partnerships are key. To try to keep up with industry standards in the classroom is difficult because things change. That’s where we count on employers and grant funds to be able to get resources for the students,” said Kati Birhanzl, MHS Career Coordinator.

The welding program is a prime example of those partnerships. Recognizing a need in the welding area three years ago, Montevideo Public Schools Superintendent Wade McKittrick and local business owner Jamie Pauling came up with a plan for improvement. Jamie is one of the owners of local firm J&D Construction, which specializes in the design, build and maintenance of grain elevators, feed mills,



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ethanol plants and fertilizer plants.

Most days, three or four J&D employees are in the classroom teaching alongside agribusiness teacher Maquelah Miner and tackling real-world projects with students. J&D also offers summer internships. Jamie wanted students to have opportunities in high school to try out what they might not be able to otherwise.

“There are far less students today that get exposure to these types of opportunities at home than there used to be, and that can create a reluctance or fear to attempt it. The CTE classes allow them to overcome this and get a taste for CTE type careers,” Jamie said. “And technical careers are a high paying and satisfying job, and pretty fun too.”

Local community foundations are **PARTNERS IN CAREER PREP**

When it comes to career and technical education (CTE), partnerships with employers, colleges and economic development agencies likely come to mind. Communities have another resource they can turn to in support of career exposure for kids: their local community foundation. Many of Southwest Initiative Foundation’s 31 community foundation partners make grants to schools for projects related to career exploration.

Earlier this school year, the Montevideo Area Community Foundation (MACF) granted half the cost to replace the safety helmets in the welding shop at Montevideo High School. Founded in 1993, MACF was created to be a permanent vehicle to serve the evolving needs of local organizations.



**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION**

15 3rd Avenue NW
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Be a part of Welcoming Week

Through Welcoming Week, organizations and communities bring together neighbors of all backgrounds to build strong connections and affirm the importance of welcoming and inclusive places in achieving collective prosperity. We provide funding and support for Welcoming Week celebrations in communities across our region each year in September. If your community is interested in hosting a Welcoming Week event in southwest Minnesota, we want to know!

Email Than Than at thanthank@swifoundation.org to find out how we can support you.

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