

Mary Jo Taylor – SEED Center

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Planting seeds. That's what gardeners do in the spring. Today we'll learn about a community which has a SEED Center – not for gardeners, but for young entrepreneurs. Today, in the conclusion of this two-part series on the community of Stafford, we'll learn that this SEED Center is an acronym for an innovative entrepreneurial learning center and laboratory for youth, conducted by the Stafford school district. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dr. Mary Jo Taylor is superintendent of USD 349, the school district in Stafford. Dr. Taylor is a native of the rural community of Syracuse, population 1,822 people. Now, that's rural. Mary Jo was a banker and personnel manager before going into education. She was principal at Stafford High School before becoming district superintendent in 2001.

Rural schools have many challenges. As part of her doctoral research at Wichita State, Mary Jo did lots of interviews with school and community stakeholders.

“My biggest hope came from when I talked to the high school-age students, because they’re at an age when they’re thinking about what comes next,” Mary Jo said. “I asked if they would consider moving back to a community like Stafford after post-secondary education, and they were willing,” she said. “But they said they needed a job to come back to.”

Such jobs are not easy to find in rural, agricultural communities. So what can rural communities do? The answer is, they need to grow their own.

That idea led to the creation of a charter school for entrepreneurship in Stafford. It was called the Stafford Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Center, or SEED Center for short. The Kansas Department of Education approved the SEED Center charter school application in 2005 but at that time the state had no funds to support it.

Did the community give up in the face of no state funding?

No. In the best tradition of rural Kansas, the citizens of the school and community rolled up their sleeves and came together to make it happen. A local citizen donated a downtown building. Members of the Methodist church were getting new carpet in their basement, so the old carpet was donated to the facility. Desks and chairs were borrowed and the SEED Center was born.

In 2006, the school district did receive a state grant. In 2009, the center transitioned from a charter school to a career pathway under the career and technical education program.

What is the Stafford Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Center? It is Stafford High School's educational facility for helping students learn entrepreneurship and marketing principles and put them into practice. The program has a complete curriculum including participation objectives and an assessment rubric. Students are expected to participate in economic development and community service through local organizations. A key tenet of this program is that students are to create and operate their own real-world businesses.

“This is not a simulation,” Dr. Taylor said. With approval from the school and parents, the student will create an actual business project and utilize marketing principles to promote it. Thirty percent of the earnings go back to the school for overhead, but students can keep seventy percent. “Students are more motivated to learn and use these principles effectively if they can keep the profit,” Dr. Taylor said. She credits SEED Center instructor Natalie Clark for outstanding work on this project.

To date, students have created more than 50 businesses, such as laser engraving, garment printing, document printing, custom team apparel, photo editing and photography, digital conversion and movie creation, secondhand store, airbrushing, rhinestone and appliqués, candles and lotions, accent and accessory items and more. Wow. Of course, not all these businesses will continue, but the life skills which the students learn will go with them forever.

Planting seeds. Yes, that is for gardeners, but it is also an appropriate way to describe the work done by the Stafford Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Center. We commend Dr. Mary Jo Taylor, Natalie Clark, and all those involved with the SEED Center for making a difference by teaching entrepreneurship at an early age. Ultimately, these seeds will take root and flourish in the lives of the students.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.