

Doug McKinney – Career Exploration

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

“Our biggest export from rural Kansas isn't wheat or corn – it's our young people.” That statement describes one of our rural communities' major dilemmas, which is the outmigration of youth. Today we'll learn about an initiative in north central Kansas which is helping make young people aware of the opportunities they have locally without having to move away. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Doug McKinney is executive director of the North Central Regional Planning Commission which serves 12 counties in north central Kansas, plus providing other services beyond that region. The commission's main office is centrally located in the region, in Beloit.

Doug explained that he and other community representatives were invited to a Kansas Department of Education forum in Topeka in December 2016. State Commissioner of Education Randy Watson invited school districts and others to come to this forum on the topic of summertime career exploration and leadership development. The one-day forum featured a school district in New York state that used summer programming to address several problems found in that school district.

“In New York, they had a lot of issues with juvenile delinquency and low graduation rates,” Doug said. “Our issues are different from theirs, but we did see how special programming in the summertime could address community needs.”

Several partners in this region of Kansas then got together to plan a special initiative to be held in the summertime. Led by Jeff Travis, the Beloit school superintendent, the other partners included Eric Burks, President of the North Central Kansas Technical College (NCK Tech); Heather Hartman, Mitchell County economic development director, and Doug from the North Central Regional Planning Commission. A K-6 technology teacher, Cris Adams, and high school counsellor Stephanie Litton coordinated the program.

The partners designed what was called Career Exploration and Leadership Development week for middle schoolers. Sessions included hands-on activities related to science, health care, law enforcement, agriculture, and entrepreneurship. (Full disclosure: I was a presenter at one session where we discussed rural entrepreneurs.) The weekly schedule included three days of speakers, lunch, and tours.

In the spring, students were offered the opportunity to participate in this innovative program. Sessions were held during three weeks in June. During those three weeks, the students learned about science and biology from Kansas Wildlife, Parks and Tourism; robotics and machining skills from NCK Tech; and much more from specific businesses. The students visited Brush Art in Downs, Cunningham Cable and Telephone, Brady's Lakeside in Glen Elder, Ringneck Ranch at Tipton, and Agmark, Agco, Kettle, and Carrico Equipment in Beloit. Several employers emphasized the extensive need for skilled technical workers. The students were even guests of the local Rotary club.

“The goal is for them to learn about career opportunities right here in their own backyard,” Doug said. Exposing youth to local opportunities may serve to help them start careers locally or come back to the community at a later age or stage of life. “We

hope they will remember this place when they're older and wiser, say, at age 25," Doug said with a smile.

In year one of the program, about 14 youth participated. Most were from Beloit but there were also students from neighboring rural communities such as Glasco, population 498, and Simpson, population 86 people. Now, that's rural.

Informing rural youth about local career opportunities can make their education more productive as well as provide the possibility that they can build a career or return to the community later on.

"The Smoky Hills Educational Service Center, which serves our region, says this is unique," Doug said. "We are doing a more formal evaluation, but the feedback from parents says that this was a topnotch experience."

The greatest export from rural Kansas is not wheat or corn, it is our young people – but this group of partners is helping their young people become aware of opportunities locally. We salute Doug McKinney and all the partners who are part of this innovative effort who are making a difference by opening doors for young people. When it comes to the next generation of business leaders in our rural communities, perhaps we can grow our own.

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