

Work-school partnership thrives

Area firms get access to future work force

By Tanner Kent

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MANKATO — An uncommon partnership between Mankato schools and businesses has given Susan Kratzke rare access to her work force of tomorrow.

As the vice president of operations for Thro Co., Kratzke oversees 332 beds and employs nearly 650 employees in assisted- and independent-living facilities in the area. But every year, she also hosts dozens of high school students who are participating in Mankato Area Public Schools' nursing certification program.

At Thro's facilities, students earn the 75 hours of field experience needed to earn state certification. In return, Kratzke is able to begin addressing the changing demographics of her work force as it shifts away from middle-aged and retiring baby boomers.

"It's worked out to be a very good program," said Kratzke, adding that many students have returned to Thro facilities for full-time employment. "For us, as an industry, this is a way to tap the interests of students when they're young."

The uncommon partnership was struck in 2003, and it has been renewed for another year by Mankato schools and Greater Mankato Growth after a summer of review.

Nearly eight years ago,

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File photo

Through a partnership between schools and businesses, students in Mankato Area Public Schools' nursing certification program can complete the 75 hours of field experience required to earn state certification at facilities owned by the Thro Co.

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the school district and GMG (which was still called the Chamber of Commerce at the time) implemented the initiative to increase collaboration between educators and business leaders, and to find solutions for attracting and retaining talent in the community.

That program has led to an assortment of career exploration opportunities for middle and high school students, including: career fairs, job shadows and internships. Mankato schools also have been on the leading edge of implementing such career-oriented programs as: Project Lead the Way (a four-year, pre-engineering curriculum), ProStart (a culinary arts curriculum) and the nursing certification course. "Everyone involved has been pleased with what's been accomplished so far," said Monde Schwartz, the career education coordinator for Mankato schools.

"But the bottom line is that we've just begun to capitalize on this partnership and there is so much potential."

The partnership is multifaceted and includes a \$35,000 contribution from GMG to Mankato's budget for vocational programs.

More than 70 businesses also have made cash and in-kind donations — nearly \$200,000 last year — to help fund classroom activities and events.

In return, business leaders are given direct access to tomorrow's work force.

Barb Embacher, vice president of community development at GMG, said the partnership was renewed for one year to study ways to improve and expand the program. A decision on future years will be made next summer.

Embacher said the partnership represents just one way GMG is attempting to address future work force challenges. Its efforts in that area earned a Community Impact Award during the Rockstars@Work Conference in 2009, which is convened to educate and train businesses on how to address evolving work force demographics.

"We are one of the leaders in the state in paying attention to how businesses and education can work together," Embacher said.

"The business community in this region is really thinking futuristically."

Mankato East's Carol Anderson teaches ProStart, a curriculum designed to give students a taste of restaurant management and prepare them for culinary careers.

In several years of teaching the course, Anderson said she's had one student graduate from Le Cordon Bleu while another is the head chef at a golf club.

Another, she said, is an assistant manager at a restaurant and numerous students have used the class to secure part-time jobs in high school and college.

"It gives students a real taste of what it's like to be in the industry," she said.

"We've had some kids do really well."