BRIDGING THE GAP: TEACHER EXTERNSHIPS HELP SHAPE THE WORKFORCE OF TOMORROW

By: Emily Younger Barnwell

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the role of teachers and staff extends beyond the confines of a classroom. To stay up to date with technological advancements and industry shifts, many educators are embracing a transformative role reversal and becoming students again.

This shift is exemplified through teacher externships where educators step out of their traditional classroom roles and immerse themselves in the professional setting.

“The key value of an externship lies in its ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By spending time in a workplace setting, teachers can observe firsthand the current trends, skills and technologies being used in specific industries,” explained Dyane Smokorowski, coordinator of digital literacy and long-time teacher at Wichita Public Schools (WPS).

Since 2013, WPS employees have completed 253 externships in a variety of industries including advanced manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality, skilled trades, technology, legal and non-profit organizations.

Carey Keller is the work-based learning coordinator at WPS and oversees the externship program.

“Externships are critical for our future workforce. It helps teachers and counselors experience professional settings so they can see the curriculum cross over into the business sector and take their experiences back to their students. Also, when businesses invite educators into their spaces it begins a vital partnership for continuous workplace opportunities for students and educators,” emphasized Keller.

Engaging Educators with Industry

Keller, who was a teacher for 24 years before taking on her current role, has completed two externships. Her first experience took place at the Wichita Regional Chamber of Commerce, followed by a second engagement with the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas.

At the Wichita Chamber of Commerce, Keller was engaged with numerous small businesses, learning their workforce needs while educating them about the many work-based learning opportunities within the district.

“I was able to gain valuable experience and transfer what I learned on-site to our work-based learning efforts at the district,” Keller detailed. “Since our internship program was new at the time it gave me a platform to meet with many business owners to bring them in on our initiatives.”

Through the Workforce Alliance, Keller was involved in the organization's Helping Youth Prepare for Employment (HYPE) initiative.

HYPE, a collaborative effort between the Workforce Alliance, the City of Wichita, the Greater Wichita YMCA and USD 259, is comprised of week-long summer career camps. In 2023, there were eight camps offering students immersive experiences in career fields including healthcare, aviation, public safety, technology, trade skills and more.

The camps are financially supported by area employers, and the youth are expected to treat the camp as a job. WPS provides two teacher externs to support each camp. The externs help students with resume writing, mock job interviews, budgeting and business communication.

“The employers also provide facility tours and presentations about what it is like to work at their company. **The externs end**

up learning just as much as the youth and provide a multiplier impact to the camps by passing along this knowledge in classrooms to more students during the school year," emphasized Workforce Alliance President and CEO Keith Lawing.

Keller highlighted the dual impact of externships on educators, saying, "Not only do externships help educators prepare youth for future employment, but they often ignite a passion within educators. Sometimes as teachers, we like to get comfortable with teaching what we have taught or teaching the same way year after year. Externships give us a fresh perspective on the industry, and it gives the industry a chance to understand education through the eyes of a teacher. It helps bridge the gap between industry and education."

Chefs Jason and Jordan Rickard, FioRito Ristorante

Employer, Employee Perspective

"They teach us as much as we teach them," said Jason Rickard, co-owner and general manager of FioRito Ristorante.

FioRito Ristorante, a contemporary Italian restaurant near Wichita's College Hill, hosts two teacher externs per year.

"We provide an engaging working environment and an opportunity for the externs to get more practice in a commercial kitchen so they can better educate their students on the realities of working in a restaurant," Rickard explained.

Eric Gentilella, a culinary teacher at Wichita Heights High School, attests to the transformative impact of his multiple externships, two of which have been at FioRito.

"It has made me a significantly better teacher. Not only content-wise but in how I reach my students and lead my classroom," said Gentilella.

Gentilella, with a diverse background as a line cook, pantry and pastry chef, and baker, emphasizes the range of skills he has gained during his externships such as bread production, pasta making and managing a sauté section.

"These opportunities, especially working the sauté section at FioRito, allow me to teach my workplace-experience students crucial skills like how to keep cool under pressure, how to organize themselves, where they should be keeping their oil bottles, their vinegar, their mise en place, so they can work quickly but work intentionally and keep their cool under pressure," he said.

Highlighting the importance of understanding industry practices, Gentilella stresses externships are essential in preparing the workforce of the future.

"We have the curriculum. We have textbooks. You can research cooking methods and different flavor pairings, but if you are

inside of a bubble, your kids aren't getting the full picture of what is happening when they go into industry," explained Gentilella.

Rickard said the industry also benefits. Most culinary instructors, like Gentilella, bring their unique expertise to the kitchen, allowing him and his staff to acquire new skills as well.

"We have learned a lot from the guests we have had in our kitchen," Rickard said. "While it is not the motivator at all for us, we would say that our externs so far were really hard workers who legitimately got busy and helped us with either production or working a position on the line. It is amazing to see how hard these teachers work."

How to get Involved

The Workforce Alliance and WPS encourage employers to connect with their local school districts or the Workforce Alliance to explore externship opportunities.

Both explain externships not only strengthen workforce development but are instrumental in creating and sustaining a robust talent pipeline within the Wichita region.

Lawing added employer engagement is flexible. If a company cannot commit to a full externship, alternative avenues include hosting facility tours or facilitating educator job shadowing.