September 18, 2014

This past spring, when IEI offered a grant competition to fund new initiatives supporting world-class teaching in North Carolina, a team from Catawba County Schools got to work. Led by Dr. Carol Moore, a K-12 science curriculum specialist, the team developed a proposal, “Real Life Issues: Project- and Problem-based Learning Development,” to build and map correlations between the workforce needs of local STEM businesses, the NC Standard Course of Study, and student learning. IEI awarded $4,500 to the Catawba group, judging their proposal an excellent example of what IEI has in mind when we seek to “think and do.”

This award was one of three Community Action Plan grants made by IEI with support from The Belk Foundation. The grants help launch initiatives that help train, retain, and support world-class K-12 teachers across the state. Thirty-two teams from the mountains, piedmont, and the coast submitted proposals.

Earlier this week the Catawba County Schools team - which includes Dr. Moore, Science House representative Gina Barrier, Bunker Hill High School principal Dr. Jeff Isenhour, and Claremont, NC, city manager Doug Barrick - led a group of teachers selected as program participants on a tour of local STEM businesses. The five teachers are Molly Barlow, biology, Challenger Early College High School;
Heather Houston, chemistry and physics, Bunker Hill High School; Danny Montgomery, horticulture and agricultural mechanics, Bunker Hill High; Andy Owens, robotics, engineering, and drafting, St. Stevens High School; and Tracey Shanks, math, Arndt Middle School.

The group toured four local STEM employers:

- **AdvancePierre Foods**, a leading supplier of baked goods and convenience food products
- **Cargo Transporters**, a national provider of truckload services
- **Centro Inc.**, an international leader in custom rotationally-molded products
- **Commscope**, one of the world’s premier providers of communication products and communication cables

The tour gave educators a first-hand look at actual conditions students will encounter as they enter the workforce. The day’s activities included spooling fiber optic cables, engineering custom rotational molds for such companies as John Deere and Caterpillar, and “driving” a tractor-trailer in a training simulator.

The group spoke directly with employees in different roles at each worksite to gather input regarding critical skills needed by future recruits. When Dr. Jeffrey Isenhour asked Mark Meyer, Centro Inc.’s operations manager, “What two things do you think students most need to know?”, Meyer responded by holding up a copy of Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. “These [habits] are a necessity for each and every position,” he responded. “Second would be math and problem-solving skills.” Throughout the day, employers stressed their interest in job candidates with strong math, communication, and comprehension skills.

Each educator participating in the “Real Life Issues” grant initiative will choose a STEM business with which to partner. Educators and their contacts at the STEM employers will then coordinate with Dr. Moore to develop project-based learning units to introduce to their classrooms. The hope is that these units will provide the best possible answer to the typical student question, “When will I ever use this in the real world?”

To learn more about the other great ideas received as part of the community action plan grant competition,
Kendall Hageman
Education Policy Manager
kendall_hageman@ncsu.edu
Twitter Handle: @Education_IEI

Do you know a teacher who is working hard to help students succeed? Let us know, and s/he could be featured in the next education issue!