

## **Greater Spokane Inc.'s Career Awareness Campaign: Bringing a Practical Application to 7-12 Grade Curriculum**

*By Amy Johnson, Vice President Public Policy and Workforce*

A dwindling supply of skilled workers, a 30% high school dropout rate and sky-rocketing costs of post-secondary education. These are all key factors in making decisions that ensure our children, and those who help them make their postsecondary decisions, are well informed of the career and training opportunities that are available to them. This is the goal of Greater Spokane Inc.'s Career Awareness Campaign.

The Greater Spokane Inc. Career Awareness Campaign focuses on educating students, educators and parents about the career and training opportunities available in the Spokane, WA, region. This campaign disseminates materials, such as booklets, brochures and websites, that focus on the high-growth, high-demand industries of allied health, aerospace, business and professional services, manufacturing and construction.

An educator-focused component to the campaign, Teach the Teachers workshops, provides grade 7-12 educators paid hours to learn about the careers available to students in the identified industries and how their curriculum directly correlates to the skills needed for these jobs. This information has helped answer the question teachers often hear students ask: "Why do I have to learn this?"

### **Needs identified**

The need for the Career Awareness Campaign was identified through industry and educator input. Industry identified a need for workforce and the lack of a younger workforce. Educators identified a lack of knowledge about careers and training programs in our region. The Greater Spokane Inc. staff, in collaboration with community partners, identified six root causes of workforce issues that are directly related to the labor shortage:

1. A lack of students training in math and sciences.
2. A regional high school dropout rate of 26%.
3. A large demand for highly skilled workers.
4. Future workforce shortages due to retirements.
5. The inability of industries to grow due to a lack of workforce.
6. A general lack of awareness of what careers are available within our region.

In all industry clusters, math and science skills are becoming much more important to possess, and with the decreased interest and abilities in these subjects, students are continually entering the workforce underprepared. The Career Awareness Campaign aims to stress the importance of these basic skills in preparation for highly skilled, highly paid careers.

Through the Career Awareness Campaign, Greater Spokane Inc. strives to promote economic vitality and improve the quality of life for the Spokane community by increasing the

number of people employed in high-demand, high-growth, high-paying jobs. This is done through increased awareness of potential career and training opportunities in the region, business growth through an increased stream of highly qualified workforce participants and a decrease in the high school dropout rate by promotion of quality and healthy options to leaving school.

Throughout the school year, the Career Awareness Campaign materials are given to teachers, counselors and administrators. The intent is to introduce the materials and let the schools best decide how to use them. This has included additional presentations to teachers, parent orientation meetings, on-site school career fairs and direct presentations to the students.

### **Externship program**

A teacher externship program is being developed for the summer of 2009. This program will send 20 teachers to work for a week in a local industry. The experience will give teachers insight into the business world and provide them with new ideas and tools for classroom lessons. Similar to a job shadowing or immersion program, externships are designed to connect classroom teachers with business professionals in their fields of study to make students' learning experiences more relevant to the workplace. Externships put teachers in employers' workplaces to give them firsthand experiences they can share with students.

Because most teachers go directly from college into the classroom, they don't have the opportunity to see how the skills they teach are applicable to the needs of business. The experience gives teachers insight into the business world, provides them with new ideas and tools for classroom lessons and reenergizes them for the school year ahead. In addition, the externships help businesses understand the importance of classroom learning and the resources students need to help prepare them for the workplace.

In this way, businesses get the chance to help build a highly skilled labor force that is in step with the ever-changing needs of the workplace. For teachers in career and technical education programs, externships are particularly important to ensure that they are preparing students for success in specific careers. Companies can also benefit from the time invested in business-education partnerships because it can help reduce the training time needed by new hires.

### **Direct student, parent contact**

In addition to the externship program, Greater Spokane Inc. gives presentations to grades 7-12 students at the request of schools. These presentations include using a reality check tool that gives students an idea of what they would need to earn to support their desired lifestyle, as well as videos showing the various careers available in each industry. Greater Spokane Inc.'s 2008-2009 school year goals for the Career Awareness Campaign include

presenting to 58 schools in 11 districts, reaching 36,000 7th to 12th graders and 1,500 teachers. Future plans include a statewide expansion of the Career Awareness Campaign to include key high-demand, high-growth industries in Washington State.

Greater Spokane Inc. is also planning an event, Career Exploration Days, for 6,000 7th to 12th graders and their teachers, counselors and parents. At the event, they will participate in hands-on and interactive demonstrations and industry-specific activities in the high-demand, high-growth fields of manufacturing, healthcare, aerospace, business and professional services, energy and clean technology, and hospitality and tourism. It won't be your average job fair—the career exploration event will provide a 2.5 hour interactive and intensive experience to give students the opportunity to learn about potential avenues for their futures.

To complete the loop of awareness, efforts are made to involve parents in the awareness of careers and training opportunities. When presentations are made directly to students, parents receive a postcard that informs them their child has received information about careers and training programs in the identified industry sectors. The goal of this direct mailing is to spur a conversation at home about potential postsecondary pursuits. Parental involvement is also encouraged at career fairs and the Career Exploration event through incentives for both students and parents.

What makes this program a success is the collaborative nature of planning and implementation. Greater Spokane Inc. hosts a bi-monthly meeting of the K-12 Roundtable, a committee comprised of 11 school superintendents and industry and government representatives. The Higher Education Leadership Group, the same type of committee, is comprised of the presidents of all higher education institutions in the area, as well as government and industry representatives. Industry committees in manufacturing, healthcare, aerospace, and business and professional services are also hosted by Greater Spokane Inc.. This representation of collaboration across industry, academia, community and government provides the best place for the planning and implementation of our multiindustry career awareness campaign.

*Amy Johnson is the vice president of public policy and workforce for Great Spokane Inc. in Spokane, WA. Greater Spokane Inc. is the organization formed from the merger of the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Spokane Area Economic Development Council. Greater Spokane Inc.'s goal is regional economic prosperity through support of sound business policies, programs that train a highly skilled workforce, and promotion of the Spokane region. For more information, visit [www.greaterspokane.org](http://www.greaterspokane.org).*