

'A new paradigm'

Local officials excited for potential of partnership program

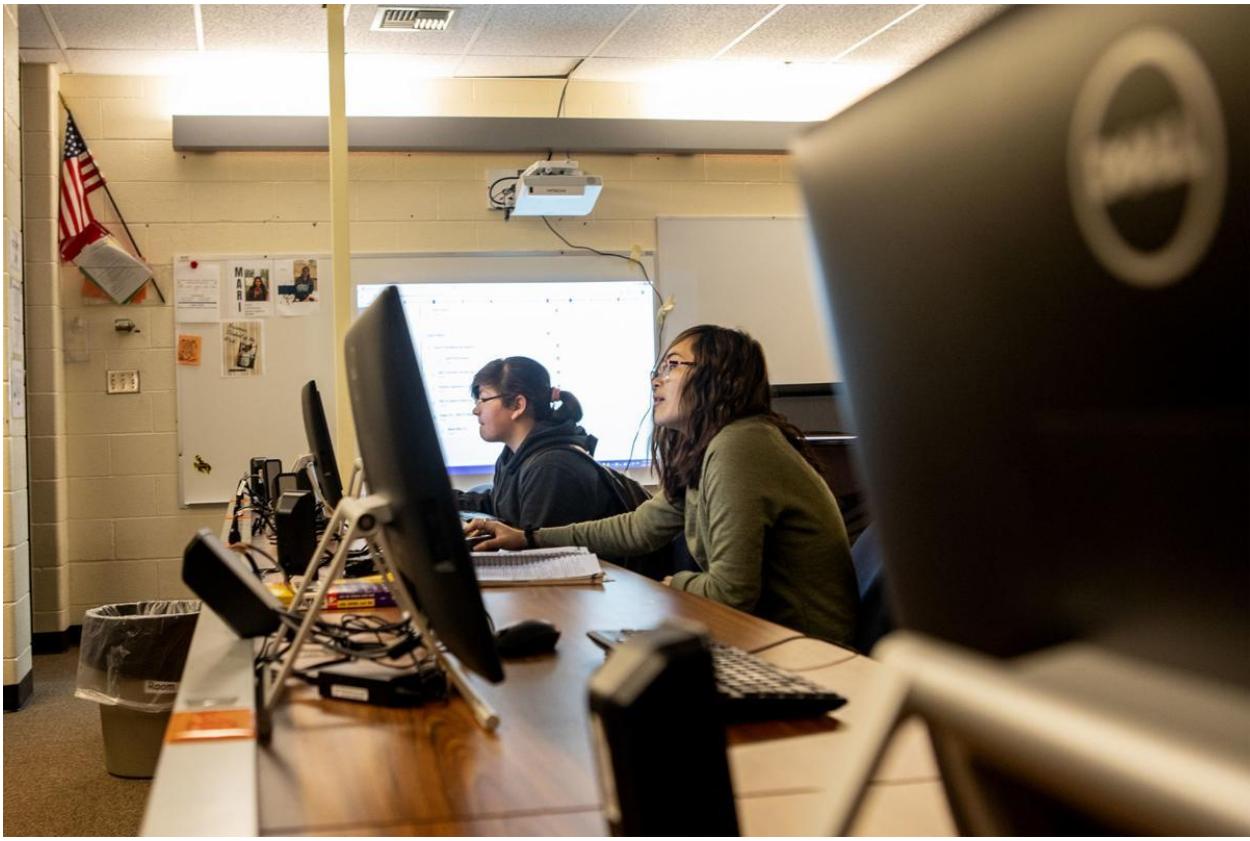
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Campbell County High School business teacher Autumn Williams, left, shares a laugh with Zane Walter, 17, during Williams' introduction to business class Friday. The upper shelves of the classroom are hold some of the trophies students have won in Distributive Education Clubs of America and Future Business Leaders of America competitions going back more than 30 years. Local officials are excited about a program that fosters partnerships between educators and the private sector.

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Jacky Estrada, 15, left, and Bea Aeliyah Vionisio, 17, work on an assignment in their Microsoft Office class at Campbell County High School on Friday.

- [News Record Photo/August Frank](#)

Wyoming is trying a new approach to economic development.

The Next Gen Sector Partnership, which was introduced in the state earlier this year, allows the private sector to take the lead in economic growth while the government takes a step back.

Lori Jones of the Campbell County Chamber of Commerce called it “a new paradigm,” because it places economic growth in the hands of the private sector.

“People are more willing to solve problems they’ve identified rather than have an outsider say, ‘If I helped you do this your job might be easier,’” Jones said.

Campbell, Crook and Weston counties are in one region and are focusing on the finance and insurance industries.

It's part of a statewide effort by the Wyoming Business Council that include nine partnerships across the state. Laramie County is focusing on the construction industry, while Sheridan and Johnson counties are examining manufacturing. Teton and Fremont counties are focusing on health care and technology.

The northeast Wyoming group identified three priority areas for action:

- Developing and filling the local talent pipeline
- Educating the community
- Building and promoting regional assets

The Next Gen Sector Partnership is paid for by the Wyoming Business Council and so far, there is no local money earmarked for the program.

"If you assemble a group of people that you know are forward-thinking and really care about their community and industry, you're going to get better results," Jones said.

After all, she said, they are the experts.

"We might think we know what their problems are, but it's better when they identify the problems, because they know so much more than we do."

Katrin Wagner, vice president of Pinnacle Bank, was responsible for recruiting businesses for the project's first meeting. She said 25 to 30 people attended.

Mary Melaragno, director of business retention and expansion for Energy Capital Economic Development, said the meeting was an eye-opening experience. She, along with representatives from Campbell County, the school district and college, were flies on the wall.

“We just had to sit back and listen,” she said. “We weren’t able to give our input. These are feet-on-the-ground people who deal with this every day, and we’re their support system.”

For the local talent pipeline piece, they’re working on everything from attracting local youth to preparing more mid-tier professionals and increasing interest in finance and insurance careers.

The goal is to produce a deeper, qualified talent pool for the industry, including helping local graduates stay or return to the region. The earlier they start, the better, Jones said.

“Everybody’s talking about how there’s no classes for high schoolers to get involved in the finance world,” Melaragno said. After talking with representatives from the school district, however, they learned that there are “many options.”

“The problem is, kids can choose finance or PE, finance or art,” she said. “They’re going to choose the easy one.”

So it’s going to be important to let parents know that “this is an option, and it is valuable,” she said.

The group is working with the school district and college to “incorporate some job fairs or internships so (students) can see what it’s like,” Wagner said.

It also sees a need to educate the community on what’s available in Gillette, as well as the benefits of a career in finance or industry.

“It’s a great career choice for single mothers or parents who want more flexible hours,” Jones said. “But if we don’t get that message out, people won’t know.”

“It’s kind of a shop local thing,” Jones said. “It’s recognizing what we do have that might bring industry and people here.”

When it came to promoting and building regional assets, Melaragno said she expected people to talk about how difficult it is to get employees and companies to move to Gillette. While they talked about this, “there was so much more than that.”

“They brought up air service, child care, students not getting the classes they need,” she said. “It was nice for all of us to see.”

Wagner said this is “a great approach” to economic growth, because she can sit down with other people in her field and hear firsthand what issues they’re dealing with.

“We can brainstorm all amongst each other, and we identified some of the same sectors that we think Gillette could improve,” she said. “It’s a lot better than (getting that information) secondhand, like it used to be.”

It also asks companies to sit down with their competitors to talk about the best ways to move forward.

“We identified true leaders,” Jones said. “True leaders know you can work with a competitor and make things better for both.”

Wagner said she doesn’t mind “working with the competition, especially in Gillette. In the end, it will benefit all for us, not just one particular company.”

“Everybody’s been working together really well because they realize this is so much bigger than their company,” Melaragno said.

In the near future, the group hopes to create an educational series on finance and insurance, as well as focus on strengthening air service.

“I hope this lasts for a long time, many years to come,” Melaragno said. “Maybe we could do an industry every six to eight months.”

Jones said with a change coming in the Wyoming governor's office, she's not sure if the state will continue funding this or if counties that succeed will have to continue on their own.

"But I see us using it again," she said. "It's a great partnership."