

Chehalis, Centralia Students Get Crash Course in Business

Friday, December 19, 2014 9:47 pm

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Local juniors from Centralia and Chehalis took part in a weeklong event aimed at teaching the students about the world of business while focusing on leadership and communication skills.

The annual event, known as Business Week, gives students an accelerated crash course in business.

The students have to come up with an original product or service, and later have to learn about production, marketing, sales, stock prices and profits, capping it off with a trade show where they find investors who are interested in their company.

The goal of the program is to teach the up-and-coming generation about the world of work, the workplace and the marketplace, said Washington Business Week Executive Director Steve McGraw.

"It's very interactive, and very engaging," he said. "Students really enjoy the experience because their company succeeds or fails based on their choices, their decisions, where they want to go, and at the same time, they are being coached by real live business professionals."

Participation in the event is mandatory for all juniors at W.F. West High School and Centralia High School. For the week, they are solely focused on running a business through eight accelerated quarters, powering through two quarters a day.

McGraw said exposing the students to business, a world that can sometimes be intimidating, is beneficial because it teaches the students to believe in themselves.

He also said the "soft skills" that come from the week are important. Things such as critical thinking, communication skills and working as a member of a team are vital qualities the students are able to focus on.

"All of those skills every business needs in their employees, and students don't get a lot of practice in that before they are walking into the work environment," McGraw said.

As students pitched their ideas to "investors," they gained Business Week dollars, securing their fate. The top three most successful businesses were acknowledged during an awards ceremony after the trade show.

"All their hard work has led to this moment," McGraw said.

In a show of support for the program, a local task force helps organize community members who volunteer as judges and company advisers. They meet monthly beginning in March to bring the event to the schools in December.

One task force member, Larry McGee, said the program is important for all of those involved. He stated Centralia College benefits from hosting the event by attracting students to its campus, while the juniors participating learn real life lessons.

"Whether the kid wants to be an artist or a magician, they need to realize unless you are independently wealthy, you at some point have to turn a skill you have into something that somebody is wanting to pay for," he said.

McGee said it also plants a seed, letting the students know that teamwork in an academic setting is very important.

"Everybody knows that schools have great bands, and great sports teams and there is a certain set of kids who are involved in making the school's yearbook, but in general in academics teamwork doesn't exist," he said. "Most companies now have come around to realize that you can't just hire someone who has the right education, you can't just hire people who are smart, they can't just be motivated. With very few exceptions people have got to have an appreciation for working as a team because that's the way important stuff is done anymore."

Business Week is also a good opportunity to break down barriers, McGraw said. Students are mixed with others outside of their normal cliques and demographics, teaching the kids how to work with different people, while being successful. The important life lesson is one McGraw is happy to provide the students with.

In all, 455 students participated in Business Week, a turnout he said was excellent.