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Regional career expo designed to aid future workforce

Employers in need of skilled, reliable labor

By J.D. Bailey

With a regional career expo only a month away, a major topic of discussion Thursday at the quarterly Southwest Arkansas Workforce Development board meeting held at Magnolia's Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District (SWAPDD) building centered around the region's youth and the workforce of tomorrow.

Officially called the Explore Success Youth Manufacturing Conference, the event will be held Tuesday, Oct. 16, 9 a.m.-1:30 p.m., at the University of Arkansas at Hope's Hempstead Hall and will specifically highlight regional industry. Lunch will be provided to eighth-graders who attend. Eight area counties — Columbia, Hempstead, Howard, Lafayette, Little River, Miller, Nevada, and Sevier — are the target region. As of last week, 700 students, through their local educational co-op, had already signed up to attend. Southwest Arkansas Development Alliance (SADA), U of A-Hope, and Southwest Arkansas Education Cooperative are the presenters.

"Our staff for a long time has wanted to hold a regional job fair," said Renee Dycus, SWAPDD executive director.

The fair will not only host representatives from regional industry and universities but two headline motivational presenters — Eric Thomas, a Michigan-based, hip-hop-loving minister with a Ph.D. and Paul Vitale, a Little Rock native and former 22-year marketing CEO — each with a different background and approach will speak.

In the description of each speaker, the expo press kit described Thomas as a dynamic speaker that will positively motivate and encourage students, while Vitale will "effectively communicate the importance of soft skills and why they are important for a successful career."

Thomas has been featured prominently online and as an inspirational voice for professional athletes. Vitale is a best-selling author and motivational speaker, having been featured on NBC, ABC, FOX, and the Minnesota Vikings Entertainment Network.

Students during the day will also be introduced to local secondary education options through a variety of on-site representatives. And although eighth-graders are admittedly not the primary target group for industry and institutions at career expos, they will be in a few years. In addition, Dycus also said that if Hempstead Hall — capacity 1,600 — is not filled leading up to the Oct. 16 event, more work-ready age groups may be able to attend.

"If we don't get enough eighth-graders to fill the capacity, then it will be offered to 11th graders, then 12th graders," she said. According to Dycus, the state now targets eighth grade as the best age for students to begin choosing and exploring professional and educational career paths.

Finding and training a workforce, especially one skilled enough for industry, is currently a challenge facing the Southwest Arkansas Workforce Alliance board. The members on Thursday specifically discussed how to better reach those without a job or skills, especially



Becky Ives, chairman of the Southwest Arkansas Workforce Development Board speaks Thursday at the Southwest Arkansas Planning and Development District building in Magnolia during the organization's quarterly board meeting.

local individuals which have dropped out of school, to fill vacant or soon-to-be vacant technical positions.

"When we go out and visit with business and industry," said Rory Gulick, board member and south Arkansas manager of the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, "what we hear is, 'we're not having the younger generation coming up with the [needed] skills and the ability; they don't have the desire to work, they don't show up on time, they don't dress right, and they don't have the ability to work with people.' But the out-of-school youth is the perfect category to start impacting some of these areas that we're so concerned about. If we don't start working with these young people. We're not going to have the next generation."

Workforce service caseworkers, other board members said, sometimes have a difficult time identifying out-of-work youths and reaching high school dropouts, due to school confidentiality and privacy protections.

"Somebody's got to know how we can just get in touch with these people and show them what we have to offer," said one audience member.

Gulick also said Thursday that he recently spoke with an unnamed employer in the region that actually rejected a pro-growth proposal, simply due to the inability to properly staff a labor pool.

"He couldn't find the employees," the board member said. "So he had to turn back an opportunity for growth in our communities because there weren't the young people that could come in and do these jobs. I'm really concerned about that."

Aiding adult or professional out-of-work or underemployed clients, though, the board stated, is not nearly as big of an issue. A new marketing and social media outreach campaign has begun by the workforce development service, to inform both adults and youth, alike of their opportunities.

"I've been here for 10 years," said Shane Bennett of SWAPDD. "And we served more dislocated [adult] workers last year than any time in the past."

To reach the younger demographic, finding the proper social media outlets may be a challenge, but in-person methods are also still in play. "They are going door-to-door, face-to-face, trying to target out-of-school youth," Bennett added.