

High schools and economic development

With a focus on individual students, the Sheridan County school districts are consistently in the top Wyoming school districts, as demonstrated through statewide academic assessments.

Students consistently score above the national average on standard testing; the districts' focus is to ensure that more students move into a level of competence.

Even with those incredible rankings, we know some students still struggle to learn, lack significant mentors in their lives to encourage learning and education, and will graduate without knowing what they will do once they have their diploma.

Unfortunately, some students will drop out of high school before they graduate.

Over the past several decades, we have read or heard the statistics regarding drop-out rates, college acceptance rates, and college graduation rates. Sadly, the U.S. statistics have not changed.

Fact: Less than 20 percent of high school students earn an Associate Degree within three years or a Bachelor Degree within six years of high school graduation.

In March of 2006, a study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation titled "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" showed that over 40 percent of high school students in the United States drop out.

Some urban areas may have a higher

percentage, and smaller rural areas, like Sheridan County, may have a lower drop-out rate. The bottom line is that this is a social and economic tragedy.

What about these students? What can we in Sheridan County do to help them become an essential part of the future work force and transition them to successful adult lives?

During the past year, I have talked with over 100 local company officials; they have voiced a desire to help the school districts in assisting these students so they can excel in school and in life.

They understand that not every child will go to college (and that going to college does not guarantee completion of a degree program).

They want to encourage students to participate in professional technical entrepreneurial programs as part of the high school curriculum. They want to establish these programs in our high schools.

With programs such as construction, electrical, plumbing, welding, computer technology, and HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), companies can mentor high school students and help them acquire skills that will make

A Community Affair

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Planning for Sheridan's economic development



them competitive, knowledgeable individuals.

Several technical teachers and counselors at Sheridan High School and Shari Peddicord of Forward Sheridan, representing the business community, recently attended

a hands-on conference in St. Louis that focused on Career Academies for technical education at the high school level.

This is not a new idea. There are many high schools across the United States that have incredibly successful Career Academies.

As we explore this idea, Forward Sheridan, business representatives from several industries, high school officials, and technical teachers have been meeting regularly since October 2006 to find solutions to implement technical trade education into the high schools.

I am very optimistic — both the school systems and the business community understand that they need to work together to create a solution.

I am pleased with the progress we've already made. The need is there. Isn't it our obligation to help those students who do not plan to attend college or are planning to drop out?

These students should have an opportunity to attend Career Academies

that can teach technical skills and inspire an entrepreneurial spirit. These skills are in great demand across the nation.

In the Gates Foundation study, one of the primary reasons students drop out (which also applies to those students who have no interest in attending college and/or struggle in high school) is that school must be "more relevant, engaging, and enhance the connection between school and work."

The existing Career Academies in the various parts of the United States are successful. They bring that relevancy to those targeted students in need.

Through the business community's mentoring, financial and technical assistance, and specialized programs at the high school level, the students' unique assets and skills can be developed to meet a growing need in our community.

Technical entrepreneurial education at the high school level provides students with the necessary skills to be successful upon graduation.

This isn't a radical way to change Wyoming high schools. We must take care of our local students, find a local solution to local needs.

"A Community Affair" is a weekly column from citizens who support Forward Sheridan, a professional business organization of invested partners whose purpose is to develop and maintain a sound economy in Sheridan County. Philippe Chino is president/CEO of Forward Sheridan.