Grant County program has all the right pieces
Career and Technology Center earns district a KSBA PEAK Award

By Jennifer Wohlleb
Staff Writer

The statewide focus on college and career readiness was not quite on the horizon when the leaders of Grant County Schools decided to build a Career and Technology Center. Since the center opened its doors in 2011, the number of students taking classes there has grown from 650 to 811 in more than 10 major areas of study.

“We had no idea there was going to be such a focus on college and career readiness, so we were very fortunate to be ahead of the curve on that and for our board to have the foresight to see a need like that and to make that a reality is really a blessing,” said Grant County Board Chairman Jim Colson.

“Not everyone is college bound. We thought if we could add something to help our students out to find a door to opportunity and get them the keys to life, we thought if we could add something to help our students contribute to society in fields that didn’t call our students out to find a door to opportunity and get them the keys to life, we thought if we could add something to help our students contribute to society in fields that didn’t call.

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“The work being done in Grant County is shaping and changing the lives of many,” said PEAK judge Ramona Malone, a member of the board of both KSBA and Newport Independent Schools. “Education is the key that unlocks the door to opportunity and Grant County has done an awesome job of bringing all stakeholders together.

“The Career and Technology Center is attached to Grant County High School, which allows students to move fluidly between the two.

“Being within the high school, all of our career and tech teachers follow the same guidelines and procedures as every other teacher in the high school,” said John Sanders, associate principal of Grant County High School, who oversees the career and tech programs, noting targets, so it’s been a change for a lot of the career and tech teachers, but the buy-in has been huge, not only from the career and tech side but the academic side as well. And it provides a lot of unique partnerships, collaborative learning as well.

“The $4,000-square-foot center houses seven new career and tech programs in addition to four existing programs (See chart). District officials credit the center with improving college and career readiness numbers, which have increased from 42 percent readiness in 2011 to 62.7 percent in 2012.

Fifty students are currently co-oping with local employers, who Sanders said are pleased with the collaboration.

“Some places we’ve had employers say, ‘You’re doing a great job, I’ll pay for you to go to school and you can work during the day and go to school at night,’” he said. “‘They’re calling us, they’re wanting our kids to co-op to try them out and then hire them full time.’

“The programs offered through the center are allowing students to not only pursue dual credit and certifications, but it’s giving them hands-on experiences in potential careers.

“Many students are not given the opportunity to explore a career path until they are well into college and then may decide to change directions, thus requiring additional classes and ultimately spending more time in college and incurring more debt,” wrote junior Dana Liggett, who is in the bio-medical studies program. She said her experience in the program has made her sure she wants to pursue a career as a pediatrician.

Before the center was built, Liggett said, some of her fellow students had to travel to an area tech center 30 minutes away to attend the programs that are now just minutes away.

“This has increased the number of students participating in the tech programs and has allowed students … to excel in ways that many otherwise would not,” she wrote in the PEAK nomination.

Colson said it was long trip combined with only 40 slots available to Grant County students at a northern Kentucky Area Technology Center that inspired the school board and then-Superintendent Michael Hibbett to build the $10 million center.

“We as a board, our main focus is to keep kids in school and one of the ways that we came up with to do that in all this discussion was the tech center and all of the classes we could offer that would benefit them in the local area, and getting them prepared for society and the next move in their future,” he said.

“Students who are here because they’re wanting to learn. That stigma is always a battle, but especially in Kentucky with college and career readiness, it’s definitely changing.

“If used to have a reputation as being for students who couldn’t make the cut academically,” he said. “I’ve seen firsthand how it does change kids. We get valedictorians over here, we get students who may be fifth-year seniors, but they’re successful over here, they’re here because they want to be here.

“If we can’t have discipline issues, behavior issues, we have students who are here because they’re wanting to learn. That stigma is always a battle, but especially in Kentucky with college and career readiness, it’s definitely changing.”

— The deadline for entering a nomination for the fall PEAK Award is Oct. 3. Visit the KSBA website at ksba.org/PEAK.aspx for more information.

Opposite page: Students in the Mechatronics program work at a state-of-the-art, 14-station trainer as they learn the integration of mechanical, electrical, pneumatic and computer technologies to control decision-making functions in machine movements used in the manufacturing environmentPhoto by Nancy Dressman/County Schools

The Career and Technology Center is the recipient of KSBA’s PEAK (Public Education Achieves in Kentucky) Award. The PEAK Award was established in 1997 to focus statewide attention on outstanding public school efforts aimed at enhancing student learning skills and, in doing so, promoting the positive impact of public elementary and secondary education in Kentucky.

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