



Pea Ridge high school juniors and seniors have the opportunity to take advantage of workforce development opportunities through the Pea Ridge Manufacturing and Business Academy, a unique partnership among the school system, local governments, and industries.

Making a difference in workforce development

By Josh Markham

Workforce development is consistently cited as one of the most important economic development issues in Arkansas. Educating people, while simultaneously fulfilling the needs of various industries, is no easy task. Workforce development requires input from the education sector, state/local government, and industry; as a result, there is no single “right” approach.

Regardless of the challenges facing workforce development, one city in Arkansas has developed a novel approach that seeks to educate high school students while also fulfilling the needed workforce skill sets of local existing industry. That city is Pea Ridge. The school: Pea Ridge Manufacturing and Business Academy (PRMBA).

PRMBA is a conversion charter school within the Pea Ridge School District that focuses on meeting the needs of business and industry through educational programs designed around specific employment pathways. As a conversion charter school, PRMBA operates within the Pea Ridge School district, but has the flexibility to hire teachers with the unique skill sets needed for its employment pathway focus.

Founded in 2014, PRMBA has enjoyed a great deal of growth in a short period of time. Open to Pea Ridge

School District students in their junior and senior year, 87 associates attended the school in the first year. Now in its second year, 140 associates are attending PRMBA.

The nature of PRMBA’s curriculum is what sets it apart. Five pathways are available to associates to specialize in: Industrial Technology, Healthcare, Marketing and Supply Chain, Plastic and Metal Fabrication, and Multimedia Production. PRMBA associates class schedules are very similar to college schedules. Associates are in charge of managing their time.

“Our associates learn much better by doing,” PRMBA Director Charley Clark said. “We don’t talk about forklifts, we drive forklifts.”

This learn-by-doing model prepares students with the skills needed to enter the workforce or to pursue more specialized training at a college or technical program. However, the pathway model requires extensive time and training away from campus. As a result, PRMBA students take their required courses in subjects such as History, English, Science, and Mathematics through an iSchool format. According to Clark, PRMBA uses one of the “most advanced digital learning environments in the USA.” Here associates work at their own pace anywhere they can access the Internet. Supervision

of teachers in each content area ensures that associates are appropriately grasping the material.

With such a unique instruction model, local businesses are excited to be a part of PRMBA. According to Pea Ridge Mayor Jackie Crabtree, local businesses see PRMBA as an economic development asset.

"Given the ability to listen to the needs of local business and industry, not only is PRMBA supplying individuals with the skill sets and work ethic they need, PRMBA is saving them time and money normally needed to train new hires. PRMBA has a direct effect to the business bottom line," Crabtree said.

The five pathways were selected through collaboration with local existing industries. Each pathway was identified as an area of needed workforce development for Pea Ridge. Local industries were selected as partners not to simply help fund the program's pathways, but to assist with curriculum development, instruction, certifications for course work, and networking opportunities. Through this collaborative process, major industrial partners stepped forward to work with PRMBA. Walmart, J.B. Hunt, Daisy Outdoor Products, Mercy Health Systems, and Coca-Cola are just a few of the local businesses supporting PRMBA's approach to workforce development.

"Our business partners are very excited about the school and are confident in its curriculum," Clark said. "The business partners essentially set the curriculum that we follow."

According to Clark, by the end of PRMBA's first year, 100 percent of its graduates were either employed, enrolled in the military, or headed to college. Year two will be closing this spring, and Clark sees workforce development as being an integral part of PRMBA's success. Clark added that "some of our associates are preparing for college, but some are preparing for a career that starts right after high school graduation."

PRMBA's approach to education shows a unique balance between the interests of local industry and the interests of its associates. Mayor Crabtree sees this as a distinct advantage for Pea Ridge. Within a short period of time, he has witnessed the positive effects of PRMBA's style of education.

"We are seeing high school students become responsible young adults," Crabtree said. "I have watched individuals who did not want to be in school transformed into individuals who are excited about being in school, excited about learning and excited about their futures."



Josh Markham is Assistant Director, Center for Community and Economic Development, University of Central Arkansas.





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