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ST. MARIES VOCATION EXPO HELPS GRADUATES TO STAY, LIVE, AND WORK IN THE COMMUNITY

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(BOISE) – The annual Vocational Expo, sponsored by St. Maries High School and the Idaho Department of Labor, was more than just your typical high school career awareness day. Its focus is on helping graduates from the remote northern Idaho town stay, live and work in the community.

Rural communities across the state struggle to keep their young people at home once they graduate. But at the St. Maries Vocational Expo this April, a large number of the 45 vendors who took part were businesses in the logging community's immediate area.

"The whole idea is to grow our own. That's what it's all about," said Kristi Payne, the program coordinator for the school district's St. Maries Community Education Center. "And it's working. We've had kids hired (by local firms) because of the connections they made at the Expo."

One of the key players was the local Association of General Contractors that helped arrange the outdoor vendor locations for safety, such as "putting a loader here, a climbing wall over there," Payne said. They also provided hats and helmets and "they do the safety talk" to the students concerning some of the heavy equipment that is demonstrated during the day.

Held every other year, "so it won't get stale," the event is primarily designed for high school students. Seventh- and eighth-grade students go through the exhibits both inside and outside the high school early in the day to "get a glimpse" at what is offered, and seniors "should have a plan by now," Payne said, so it is primarily focused on sophomores and juniors (although they also let the freshmen in).

"We want them to see what's out there, and start thinking about their future," Payne said. The St. Maries community is dominated by the Potlach Corporation and Stimson logging mills. The Jack Buell logging truck company "is huge in this area – they're the largest truck company in Idaho," Payne said, and Danielsen's (trucking) "also brings in a lot of equipment" to the career awareness exposition.

There are a lot of "hands on" exhibits, Payne said. "For example, the hospital had a giant 'Operation' game, and the (local) Beauty Institute brings about six students and they do hair, braids and haircuts."

"We try and tell the vendors to have things that are hands on. If you're just handing out brochures, it's not as attractive," to the students, Payne said. "We don't break up our kids in groups. We let them choose their own paths. We hand them a passport to be stamped" and that helps them win prizes handed out during the day.

"The kids love it," Payne said. "There's something to keep them engaged all day. A lot of them start out just going to some (vendor) they're interested in, but by the end of the day they've gone to just about everything. You don't see the kids sitting on the bleachers" during the event. This year the expo hosted approximately 460 students, not just from St. Maries, but students also were bused in from the nearby Lakeside, Kootenai and Potlach schools. "I ordered about 900 hot



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dogs,” to feed the students, Payne laughed. It’s a big event in the community. The school’s entire staff, about 35 people, took part, plus the schools that bused in students brought another 15 or so adults to chaperone and help – “not counting the vendors,” Payne said.

Besides the local logging firms and other businesses showing off what jobs were available and describing the skills needed for them, Northern Idaho College also had a large number of exhibit booths explaining approximately 20 programs it offers, ranging from nursing to automotive repair to aerospace training.

Payne said that while “we’d love to do it in the fall, with logging in full swing then, it just isn’t possible.” Instead with over four months of planning and lining up vendors behind them, the expo organizers hold the event in the spring, just prior to the time students begin registering for next year’s classes. To meet the local community’s job needs, the school district has an emphasis on vocational education programs.

“Two years ago, NIC sent a woman welder as part of the programs they were promoting,” Payne said. “Since then, we’ve increased the number of girls in our welding program by 25 percent.” Welding is useful for logging and trucking companies, and good welders are in high demand locally.

In addition, the local hospital’s participation has helped spur an increase in students taking health occupations courses at the high school. “I’m really proud of our kids,” Payne said. “They’re out there doing it, embracing the opportunity.”

She also praised her principal and superintendent for their backing of the event, and added that “we couldn’t have done it without the support of our school board. There are some safety issues with some of the equipment (shown and demonstrated) at the expo, but the board was willing to let industry come in.”

In the end, the expo helps students identify their career goals and focus their coursework to meet those goals, but in part because of the support of local businesses and industries, it has the added benefit of “maybe giving our best and brightest a chance to stay in the community they grew up in,” Payne said, “to have good jobs and contribute for the rest of their lives to our area.”

It’s what local schools do.

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Photos:

Heavy Equipment – Local businesses and industries in the north Idaho logging community displayed some of the heavy equipment they use as part of the St. Maries Vocational Expo.

Exhibit Area – Students learned what it is like to be a firefighter at the exhibition area set up by the St. Maries Fire Protection District.