

Commentary: Career tool affordable way for business to impact students

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The decline of high-tech and construction jobs, along with corporate consolidations and the relocation of large manufacturing firms out of Sonoma County, has raised concern over the development, education and training of the work force to meet current and future demand. Much of this concern, voiced by the Innovation Council and others, focuses on the goal of finding better ways to match people and skills to changing workplace needs.

The number of career possibilities has multiplied into the thousands and, even with Internet access and career counseling, it would be difficult for any middle or high school student to become acquainted with more than a few dozen career options in time to take the right courses to match workplace requirements.

Experience has shown that students and educators cannot wait until the senior year in high school to begin career awareness projects – such programs should start in the elementary grades and continue through middle and high school and beyond.

Faced with an ever increasing mismatch of jobs, skills and employer criteria in the region, the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) is working with key stakeholder groups to guide the development of a comprehensive career development system for grades K-16. A major component of this effort is the Kuder Career Planning System – a comprehensive online career and academic planning tool that gives students an awareness of various career options and helps them assess personal career interests and preferences.

The system further aids them in becoming familiar with skills and workplace values plus gives them the ability to make side-by-side comparisons of careers and more than 7,000 technical schools, colleges and universities.

The first of three age-appropriate modules of the Kuder System is being used by many schools in Sonoma County today. Called the Kuder Navigator, it is an advanced interactive computer-aided program designed for students in grades six to 12 that helps them learn about themselves, conduct research-based assessments, build an education plan, explore and prepare for various occupations after high school as well as plan for work and how to find a job.

This system has information on more than 10,000 scholarships and financial aid programs while also enabling students to explore training requirements. The Kuder system allows students to obtain an advance preview of the education level and skills needed for various job opportunities and provides them with a multi-year planning component to help track their progress toward education and career goals.

It also shows them what to expect during the typical work day in different occupations as well as salary ranges for each job.

SCOE launched a pilot program using the Kuder system in 2008 involving 10 middle and five high schools plus community-based youth-serving organizations in the county and received very positive feedback. Today this program has grown to encompass more than 19,000 students in 39 schools and youth-serving organizations. This represents approximately two-thirds of the middle and high school age students in Sonoma County. The goal now is to expand use of this system, with business sector support, to any and all interested middle and high schools in the county.

With public education budgets tighter than ever, business community sponsors are needed to assist SCOE in expanding the Kuder system countywide by helping us purchase a sufficient number of personal Kuder accounts to help open an electronic door to one common career planning system. While the retail cost for an account is \$25 per student, when purchased in quantity the cost falls to less than \$1 per student.

Business groups and organizations such as the Sonoma County Alliance, Kaiser Permanente, Exchange Bank, TLCDC Architecture and others have already made significant contributions toward the purchase of Kuder Navigator accounts.

While no single tool can address all the training and work force needs that our region faces, the Navigator system does create a powerful connection between education and the changing needs of the 21st century work force and employer requirements. We encourage members of the business community to adopt a school by becoming a business sponsor through the purchase of additional accounts for more students in Sonoma County.

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Dan Blake is the career development specialist for the Sonoma County Office of Education. He manages the Kuder Career Planning System project in county schools. For more information about the Kuder Career Planning System and how you can become a sponsor, go to www.mycareerspace.biz and click on the "Kuder Adopt a School Program" or contact Dan Blake at dBlake@scoe.org.

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