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Entrepreneur program enriches students, communities

Program a good fit with agriculture. Students have visited grain farms, hog farms, a flour mill, agrichemical-fertilizer dealerships and other ag-related businesses.

Crawford County CEO students tour the Annapolis Grain Co., and learn about the grain industry and export markets used to sell local grain. The group received an overview of the grain-handling process and learned about the importance of capital and business relationships. (Photo by John Ireland, Crawford County CEO facilitator)

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An entrepreneurship program allows teens and local businesses to learn from each other, pumping life into their communities.

Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship CEO Connect, based in Effingham, connects school districts, community leaders and local businesses to provide high school students in-depth business education and entrepreneur experience. Currently, CEO Connect is offered in 39 locations, primarily in downstate Illinois and three other states.

Cheryl Bierman Mitchell, CEO director of entrepreneurship education and daughter of former Jasper County Farm Bureau President Joe Bierman, sees connections between Farm Bureau and the CEO program. She will speak July 25 during the county Farm Bureau Presidents Conference.

"This (program) is an investment in the community, and Farm Bureau is all about community and giving back to the community," Mitchell said.

A local CEO program is private and overseen by a local operating board funded by local investors who each contribute $1,000 annually and make a three-year commitment. Motivated students, who earn high school credit, must apply for the yearlong course that meets for 90 minutes from August through May.

Joel Owens, far right, EH Baare Corp. engineering manager, explains the Robinson company's manufacturing process and quality control to Crawford County CEO program students. Topics included local and global trade of wire fan guards and motor mounts made by the company.

Along with learning business skills, students learn about their communities and local industries while gaining mentors and network connections, Mitchell explained.

"Kids this age don't know about the economic system, how the county board works or what Farm Bureau does and why it is important," Mitchell said. "In this program, we explore this ... Kids are exposed to all different professions within a business."

Local business and community experts serve as instructors, host student tours and provide class meeting locations. Business leaders also learn about young people. Some businesses added news services and products or adjusted their practices after hearing students' ideas.

As the CEO name implies, the students' goal is to develop and start a business. At first, the class develops a group business plan. In the second semester, each student starts a business, makes a profit and showcases the product or service during a local student-organized trade show.

"The thread running through this is business and entrepreneurship," Mitchell said. "Some (students) continue their business. Some have opened brick-and-mortar businesses in their community; others have learned this is not for them**."**

IFB Director Steve Hosselton, a member of the Local and State Government Strength With Advisory Team, which hosted Mitchell in March, said he was impressed by CEO opportunities for students. He noted they not only learn about their communities, but also gain business skills and connections that might become mentorships.

"This (program) is no (additional) expense or drain on the school district," Hosselton noted.

CEO makes a good fit with agriculture. Students have visited grain farms, hog farms, a flour mill, agrichemical-fertilizer dealerships and other ag-related businesses.

Mitchell summarized the CEO program's value to students: "This opens their eyes to all the possibilities that exist."

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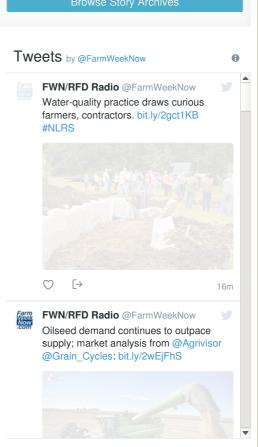
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