



For Immediate Release May 23, 2024

Contact: Beth Anne Piehl
Char-Em ISD Director of Communications
231.330.5701 piehlb@charemid.org

Work-Based Learning, aka ‘co-op:’

Students earn income, high school credits, and can pursue their dreams as they work toward graduation

One local senior has been working on welding a pontoon boat in Cheboygan. Another shadowed at the 33rd Circuit Court, interested in pursuing a law career while working on clerical and court-related tasks. A third senior, interested in a career in accounting, has learned bookkeeping skills at Irish Boat Shop.

These students are among 21 from throughout Char-Em ISD who are benefitting from the reboot of “co-op” - the opportunity for students to work part time during the school day to earn income and school credits toward graduation at the same time. Co-op is also known as “work-based learning,” which describes exactly what these students are doing to help prepare them for life after graduation.

“I gained extensive knowledge of workplace culture,” said Ben Matter, the accounting senior from Charlevoix High School. “Connecting my school learning with on the job experiences helped me see the classwork pay off. It was a great experience, helping me deepen my knowledge of both accounting and business processes.”

JMG Specialists help pair the students with employers, which could be difficult for a student and their family to arrange on their own.

“It’s really not easy for someone to get this kind of experience without a formal program in place. It would be difficult to know where to start, and who to contact to get a foot in the door. Add the pay element and accountability we provide by helping to supervise students, and it’s really a very well-rounded opportunity for both students and businesses alike,” said Tracy Beckley, a Jobs for Michigan’s Graduates (JMG) specialist in Harbor Springs and the JMG Work-Based Learning Coordinator for Northwest Michigan Works.

Beckley is one of six JMG specialists who help coordinate co-op opportunities for students throughout the ISD’s 11 public school districts. Char-Em ISD partners with Northwest Michigan Works to provide the JMG specialists who coordinate co-op relationships. Some districts offer their own versions of work-based learning that are not coordinated by this partnership, Beckley noted. The information in this article pertains specifically to the ISD-Northwest Michigan Works collaboration.

As the school year winds down, Beckley provided some details about how this first full year of co-op went throughout the ISD:

- 21 co-op students were placed with 21 regional businesses.
- Students work typically 2 hours per day, Monday-Friday. Many work more hours.
- Students earn between minimum wage (\$10.33 per hour) and \$20 per hour. Students are paid by the employer, with some potential reimbursement available to employers.
- 10 participants were placed in businesses that connected with one of their career and technical education classes.
- At least eight students will be continuing with their employer after graduation in full-time job positions. Another is weighing multiple employment offers. Two students are headed to the Marines and the Army (and therefore unable to continue immediate employment after graduation).
- School participation: Harbor Springs, 2 students; Boyne City, 2 students; Petoskey, 8 students; East Jordan, 1 student; Pellston, 3 students; Charlevoix, 3 students; Alanson, 1 student; Ellsworth, 1 student.

Students involved in the program have found it beneficial to reaching toward their post-secondary goals.

“I think the co-op program is a great way for all students to find what they are strong and confident doing,” said Wyatt Troyer, a Petoskey High School senior who has been working at Dave Kring Chevrolet in Petoskey, where he plans to continue after graduation. “This program can also give young adults the tools to build and develop their future.”

Beckley said she hopes the program continues to grow from this successful first year.

“We have had a lot of success this year and we hope to continue to grow the program. Ideally we’d like to get 50 or more students involved,” said Beckley. “Each student that is staying with their employer represents filling a need in their industry, and that is a reason to celebrate. We hear all the time from employers that they need workers, especially in the skilled trades. This program works toward filling that need directly.”

The expansion of co-op throughout the ISD came about in large part due to the Career and Technical Education Millage renewal and expansion in May 2022, said Jim Rummer, Char-Em ISD Career and Technical Education Director. Up until around 2008, “school-to-work coordinators” could be found in many districts. Those positions were eliminated in budget cuts over the years.

“The fact that our voters see the need for this kind of work in our schools speaks volumes to their awareness of workforce demands,” said Rummer. “We are so grateful to be able to get back on track with work-based learning and set up our students for success, while assisting our regional workforce find and train the workers they need.”

Many of the students in the program are also enrolled in career and technical education courses and have learned skills that translate well into their co-op placements. Participating students must be seniors, be in good standing with their school and on track to graduate, with acceptable attendance records.

“This opportunity allows students to earn high school credits along with getting paid. For some students, this is the best scenario as they are eager to get into the workforce and they also place an importance on graduating,” said Susan Ward, Youth Services Director with Northwest Michigan Works. (Ward recently relocated with her family out of state and is no longer with Northwest Michigan Works.)

When students enroll in co-op, they are also enrolling in the JMG program which comes with a number of supports including a specialist who helps guide them toward career success with soft skills, resume-building, and the chance to apply for specific scholarships. JMG specialists also follow the students for the first year after graduation to monitor success and mentor them once a month.

A typical day for co-op students involves them attending their high school for the morning hours, often to complete required classes such as senior English and math. Around lunchtime, they head out to their place of employment where they work until around 3 p.m. or later.

“I learned how an actual work environment felt like and how to work within a team of coworkers to get jobs finished,” said Jack Schmalzreid, a Pellston High School senior working in welding with the boat company in Cheboygan. “I learned more about the trade itself by getting advice from coworkers and seeing how they go about things to get the job done as quickly as possible and also making it look as good as possible.”

Beckley gets most excited telling the success stories from this past year. The student interested in accounting may not have considered that a business like Irish Boat Shop needs an accountant, for example. The welding student hadn’t naturally connected the dots that at a welding shop he would work on a boat.

“Quite a few of the students said they didn’t know about the business-side of where they were working, and that was eye-opening. Some of them talked about how this helped them learn what they want to do after high school, and some learned about what they don’t want to do - which is just as important.”

She said it has been a joy to watch the students’ skills and confidence grow.

“I’ve seen a huge improvement in their communication over the school year. They have become more professional and that’s fun to see,” said Beckley. “I think that a lot of them have learned they are truly capable of more than they thought and they are capable of working in a professional environment.”

Ward said the first year of the program is wrapping up with success.

“I am really pleased and proud of Tracy for all of the work she did to get this going. I’m very glad that all 21 students were able to benefit from this program,” said Ward. “It’s important for the community to know how their tax dollars are being spent, and for the community to know they are being used in a good, positive way that is benefiting students.”

In her position, Ward is aware of statewide efforts to help match students with employers and she said the Char-Em program stands alone in its model and effectiveness. “No one throughout the state is implementing it the way we have in Char-Em,” said Ward.

Interested students should reach out to their high school counselor or the JMG specialist at their school to inquire about participation.

Businesses interested in participating in co-op for the 2024-25 school year can contact Beckley at tracy.beckley@networksnorthwest.org

Factbox #1:

To participate in co-op a student must:

- Be a 12th grade student AND at least 17 years old
- Be on track to graduate and passing all classes
- Have acceptable school attendance records
- Have availability in their schedule to attend half day of classes and half day of co-op
- Have an Educational Development Plan (EDP) related to desired industry
- Be taking a class related to the Co-op during 12th grade
- Have reliable transportation to and from the co-op site
- Be responsible and have a respectful attitude and a willingness to learn.

Employers interested in placing a student must:

- Have interest in mentoring a student
- Be willing to have a yearly safety inspection and follow-up meetings regarding the student's performance every 9 weeks
- Agree to follow through on a training program

Factbox #2:

2023-24 school year work-based learning business partnerships

33rd Circuit Court, Charlevoix
Brown Motors, Petoskey
Charlevoix County Prosecutor's Office, Charlevoix
Charlevoix Humane Society, Boyne City
Coldwell Banker Fairbairn Realty, Alanson
Northland Area Federal Credit Union, Petoskey
CrossFit, Petoskey
Dave Kring Chevrolet, Petoskey
Designs by Dawn, Petoskey
Fyzical Therapy and Balance Center By The Bay, Petoskey
George Graham Excavating, Petoskey
Gilda's Bakery, Boyne City
Irish Boat Shop, Charlevoix

Jim Riehl's Friendly Ford, Charlevoix
Keller Landscaping, Harbor Springs
Northern Michigan Escapes (Edgewater Inn) Charlevoix
Nub's Nob, Harbor Springs
S&S Welding, Petoskey
Stema Welding, Cheboygan
Stillwater Cabinet Design, Petoskey
Wentworth Builders, Harbor Springs

#

Caption: Wyatt Troyer, a senior at Petoskey High School, has been working at Dave Kring Chevrolet in Petoskey this past school year and plans to continue working there full time after graduation.