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CENTERPIECE

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'They're learning and they leave with skills': US Secretary of Education Linda McMahon tours Innovation Center

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star

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U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon, left, studies the Anatomage Table, a life-size, interactive 3D digital dissection and anatomy visualization system used by Handley High School students in the Introduction to Health and Medical Sciences class during her tour of Winchester Public Schools' Emil and Grace Shihadeh Innovation Center Thursday.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

United States Secretary of Education Linda McMahon joined Congressman Ben Cline for a tour of Winchester Public Schools' Emil and Grace Shihadeh Innovation Center on Thursday.

The visit was part of McMahon's "Returning Education to the States Tour," a 50-state tour that began last August with the stated goal of empowering families and hearing from students, teachers and leaders on best practices in their communities.

So far, the tour has stopped in 40 states.

"Anytime I can show off Winchester, I'm anxious to," said Cline, who is seeking reelection this fall. "... It's (the Innovation Center) such a great facility, and the opportunities that it provides for these students are fantastic."

The Innovation Center opened its doors in 2021 in a former elementary school building that was transformed. Its mission: bringing career and technical education (CTE) to Winchester's students fueled by community collaboration and support.

WPS Superintendent Jason Van Heukelum said that the center "has become a model of how high schools might look differently across the country," especially regarding the concept of integrating CTE into curriculum for all students.

"We believe every kid can learn and have advantages because of CTE," Van Heukelum said, "and so that's the message that we wanted to share."

McMahon and Cline went on a student-led tour of the Innovation Center on Jefferson Street, visiting classrooms and hearing about program offerings including carpentry, welding, electricity and an array of health sciences.

Along the way, students shared about the internships, certifications and work-based learning opportunities they've earned through their experiences at the Innovation Center.

Asked what best practices the Innovation Center exemplified for other schools, McMahon said, "I think all of it, actually."

She noted, in particular, WPS's 95% graduation rate, which she called "an incredible stat," and said she believes the integration of CTE with traditional academics contributes to that success.

"These kids are actually learning things that are going to be meaningful to them and so they're staying, they're learning and they leave with skills, and they leave with certifications that they can go to work right away, which is needed in the community."

McMahon, a billionaire and co-founder of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), has emerged as a polarizing figure in President Donald Trump's second administration.

Entering the role of secretary of education with no background in education, McMahon has led the administration's charge of dismantling the federal Department of Education (DOE).

Only Congress can formally dissolve the DOE, but Trump officials have hollowed the department through a series of re-delegations, most recently moving special education and civil rights oversights to the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice, respectively.

Critics have warned that students of color, multilingual learners, low-income students and students from rural communities will be most impacted by such changes, all classifications that make up large percentages of WPS's demographics.

Asked about the division's goals in showcasing the Innovation Center on Thursday, Van Heukelum said "my primary goal is to showcase the power of public education."

He spoke to WPS's diversity, including "pockets of poverty" and a "majority minority" population.

"We are a cross section of America," he said. "... This is what America looks like, and so I always tell my team that if we can be successful and create 18 year olds that walk across that stage with a vision for their life, real skills to go out and make a living and have a path forward economically and with their family, then America is going to be OK."

— Contact Molly Williams at mwilliams@winchesterstar.com

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