

## **Oklahoman: Schools hope to increase focus on career readiness**

Sunday, November 12, 2017 | by Ben Felder

While in high school, Ridge Hughbanks “fell in love with arguing” as a member of the debate team and developed a passion for agriculture issues through his participation in FFA.

“In high school you have an idea of your interests but you are just feeling your way around,” said Hughbanks, a graduate of Alva High School who is now a sophomore at Oklahoma State University, where he is studying agriculture business in hopes of someday working as a lawyer or advocate for the industry.

Hughbanks was one of several high school and college students who addressed a crowd of educators Thursday at the New Skills for Youth Stakeholder Summit in Oklahoma City, discussing the ways extracurricular activities, job shadowing programs and passionate teachers helped them set career goals.

State education leaders hope to encourage more public schools to focus more on creating more high-quality career pathways, especially as Oklahoma experiences a shortage of skilled labor and a large number of high school students enter college needing to take remediation courses.

Thursday’s summit, which was hosted by the state Department of Education, explored ways for schools to partner with businesses to establish student internships and mentorships.

The Department of Education also wants to increase individualized academic plans for students and have more students enroll in concurrent and dual enrollment courses that offer college credit and career certification before high school graduation.

“We really want to shift (the focus of career options) from being something that we only talk about at the end of high school, when students have already spent their high school career taking certain courses, and start focusing on it as early as elementary school,” said state schools Superintendent Joy Hofmeister, who moderated the student panel discussion. “How can we individually prepare students ... to hit the ground running when they graduate and hit that stage ready for college and career?”

The state’s effort is being partially funded through a \$2 million grant from JPMorgan Chase & Co.

“Too many young people entering the labor market find themselves stuck,” said David Page, managing director and vice chairman in Oklahoma for JPMorgan Chase, who attended the summit.

Oklahoma labor statistics show there are more than 60,000 open jobs across the state, including nearly 10,000 openings in the science and technology field.

The state estimates nearly three-fourths of Oklahoma jobs are expected to require a postsecondary credential or degree by 2025, which restricts employment opportunities for those individuals with just a high school diploma.

“Those fifth graders today, when they graduate in eight years, they are going to require postsecondary education,” Hofmeister said. “It is not enough to just walk off that stage and go into the work force.”

The summit included breakout sessions highlighting existing programs in Oklahoma schools that use business partnerships to help students explore various career fields.

The Department of Education has placed an emphasis on career and college readiness in its new public school plan called Oklahoma Engage, which was recently submitted to the U.S. Department of Education for final approval in meeting new federal school guidelines.

The emphasis on career and college readiness also comes at a time with Gov. Mary Fallin has announced her own initiative called Earn & Learn Oklahoma, which includes a goal to increase the number of paid internships and apprenticeships in Oklahoma to 20,000 each year by 2020.

“Increasing the number of work-based learning opportunities in our state — for not only the youth but also our adults — is vital to ensuring that Oklahoma can continue to prosper and move forward,” Fallin said last week in announcing the goal.