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200 BUSINESS, EDUCATION LEADERS ATTEND INAUGURAL WORKFORCE PROGRAM County Group to Help Students Find Pathways to College, Career, and High-Demand Occupations

Nearly 200 hundred business, community, and education leaders from across Westmoreland County learned about a new group that is working to improve workforce quality and economic development.

The Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development held its inaugural program and dinner Thursday, September 24, 2015, at the Greensburg Country Club. The evening's presentations shared a common theme: There is a need to find a better way to help students find pathways to college and career with connections to the high-demand occupations of the future.

Leaders from the 17 school districts in Westmoreland County, along with its three Career and Technology Centers, have come together with public officials and representatives from business and industry, economic development, and colleges and universities to promote career awareness, exploration, preparation, and development programs for students. They are emphasizing an understanding of high-demand occupations such as energy; engineering and technology manufacturing; business, finance, and information technology; health, education, and human services; homeland and international security, national and international government agency services; and environmental education, protection, and safety.

The event featured remarks from the Westmoreland County Board of Commissioners; Dr. Tuesday Stanley, President of the Westmoreland County Community College; and the evening's keynote speaker, Mr. Ron Cowell, President of the Education Policy and Leadership Center in Harrisburg. The Master of Ceremonies was Dr. William Kerr, Norwin Superintendent of Schools and Chairman of the Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development.

The Forum's goals are to:

- Change the regional culture to support Career Education and Work Standards.
- Create a sustainable infrastructure that aligns educational resources to respond to economic and community opportunities.
- Develop a replicable county model based on the Pennsylvania Career Education and Work Standards.

"We need to fix the misalignment between education and workforce, and supply our companies with the skills that they need to stay here, to thrive here and to grow here," said Mr. James L. Smith, President & CEO of the Economic Growth Connection of Westmoreland. "Tonight's program, crafted and shaped by the talented men and women in this room, offers the first steps toward that goal."

Mr. Smith spoke on behalf of two other economic development leaders in Westmoreland County: Mr. Jason Rigone, Executive Director of the Westmoreland County Industrial Development Corporation; and Mr. Chad Amond, President of the Westmoreland County Chamber of Commerce.

Guests watched a [new video titled *Pathways to Success in Westmoreland County*](#) that captures the Forum's mission to help to overcome the "skills gap" between what local employers need and what local residents can provide. Mr. Bill Thompson, who is Executive Director of the Westmoreland / Fayette Workforce Investment Board, spoke about the creation and rationale for the video, giving credit to Mr. Alec Italiano, Communications Manager for the Westmoreland County Industrial Development Corporation, as well as Doug McDonough and Harry Metz of the Private Industry Council.

Each of the three members of the Westmoreland County Board of Commissioners – including Chairman Mr. Charles Anderson, Mr. Tyler Courtney, and Mr. Ted Kopas – attended and provided supporting remarks. Each praised the workforce forum for better connecting business and education to improve learning opportunities that align curricula to real-world experiences through mentorships and internships – a proactive approach for a highly skilled and quality workforce.



Above: Speakers from the Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development's inaugural program and dinner, held September 24, 2015.

Dr. Frank Kordalski, who serves as Dean of Workforce Development at the Community College’s Advanced Technology Center, shared real-life stories about students and their learning related to Pathways to Success.

Next, three educational leaders moderated a panel discussion about the Westmoreland County College and Career Pathways model (*see graphic at right*), which was built on a national framework but is customized to meet the workforce needs of Westmoreland County and southwest Pennsylvania. ([Please click here to view their PowerPoint.](#))

The three panel discussion moderators, who encouraged moving forward from concept to next action steps, were:

- Dr. Christine Oldham, Ligonier Valley School District Superintendent.
- Dr. Gennaro Piraino, Franklin Regional School District Superintendent.
- Dr. Craig Santicola, Dean of Distance Education, Education Centers, and High School Partnerships at Westmoreland County Community College.

Dr. Santicola said, “The model was co-designed by K-12, postsecondary, and industry partners to provide students a seamless transition from high school to credential to career. At its core are ten global competencies infused across the curriculum of the five career clusters and 11 pathways.”

“Through the pathways, we can create opportunities for students,” Dr. Oldham said. “A lot of great things are being done by districts in isolation. We need to find ways to connect those best practices to create opportunities that can be available to all students in the County. Imagine the opportunities students would have if we all worked together – school districts, post-secondary, and industry.”

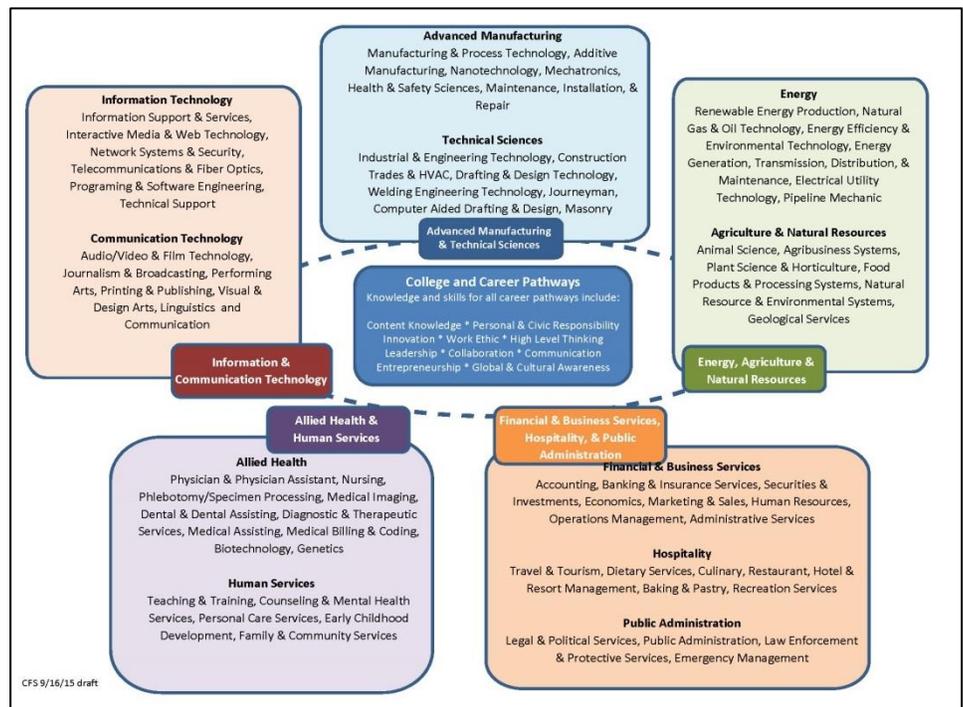
“Regardless of whether a student plans to attain a graduate level degree, attend a four-year college, earn an associate’s degree or delve right into the world of work, there must be a place for each student in these career-centered educational programs,” Dr. Piraino said. “As programs are designed, we must have safe or soft landing spots for students who change their mind. These programs must make career-centered off-ramp and on-ramp transitions possible for our students.”

Dr. Tuesday Stanley, President of Westmoreland County Community College, led an Interactive Tabletop Discussion based on prompts to stimulate thinking among leaders to “think outside the box” as the Forum looks to the future. The three prompts discussed were:

1. If you had a magic wand, what changes would you make to the County of Westmoreland to address the demographic and workforce issue?
2. What structures do you (the school district) have in place to help promote a county-level Career Pathway system?
3. Discuss the barriers (and solutions) in being able to develop a county-wide educational system.

“Career pathways ensure that students have a college credential that leads to a family wage-earning career in our communities,” Dr. Stanley said. “Reflecting on what we do and how we need to plan and then ‘wave our magic wand’ is not only what the dinner highlighted but also the reality of where we need to be as the educational conduit for tomorrow’s generations.”

Dr. Piraino also introduced the keynote speaker, who was Mr. Ron Cowell. Mr. Cowell serves as President of the Education Policy & Leadership Center, which is an independent, non-partisan and not-for-profit organization based in Harrisburg. He is an experienced policy leader who also is a frequent speaker, writer and consultant concerning education policy issues.



The Westmoreland County College and Career Pathways model.

[Please click here to view the full PowerPoint Presentation](#)

“The Westmoreland Forum – a collaboration among education sectors and business and community organizations to promote career and technical education opportunities – is a model from which our Career and Technical Education Study Group can learn as we prepare our statewide report and recommendations during the next several months,” Mr. Cowell said. “Those who are concerned about workforce development must join the effort to assure high quality P-12 education opportunities for all students, regardless of the wealth of the school district where they reside.”

Dr. Jason Conway, Executive Director of the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit, [unveiled the Forum’s new Charter Declaration](#), which outlines its major goals and contributors. Member organizations are encouraged to have their respective boards pass a resolution for participation in the County-wide collaborative.

Dr. Kerr concluded the event with a request to all to remain committed to the mission of the Westmoreland County Forum for Workforce Development.

“There is a strong correlation between the quality of our schools and the quality of our communities. Therefore, an investment in education is an investment in the economic vitality of the region,” Dr. Kerr said. “I ask that you embrace the core belief that together we can change the regional culture to develop and support a replicable county model based on Pennsylvania Career Education and Work Standards through collaboration among all key stakeholders.”

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