

Case Study: Pikes Peak Business Education Alliance

Colorado Springs-area districts demonstrate the power of working together

As many in education administration can tell you, leadership roles can be lonely: It's hard to find people who understand the particular challenges you face, and who can offer informed feedback on how to make the greatest impact with limited resources. This is particularly true in Career and Technical Education (CTE), which deals with a unique set of challenges and objectives in the education world. In Colorado Springs, CTE leaders faced additional challenges: The city and its surrounding area hosts seventeen school districts, each of which must call on the same employer base to support their programs and work-based learning efforts.

In order to share information and strategies, and to discuss coordinating their approaches, CTE Directors representing some of these districts have been meeting on an informal basis for years. Recently, thanks to the leadership of one of the districts represented at these meetings, their informal network is in the process of becoming a formal initiative that will address shared challenges and present a unified face to employers throughout the area.

ORIGIN OF THE PIKES PEAK BUSINESS & EDUCATION ALLIANCE

While there are 17 school districts in the immediate area in and around Colorado Springs, not all have full-time CTE Directors given their varying sizes. So when the idea for a monthly informal meeting came about, just three – those from Districts 11, 20, and 49 – began to attend on a regular basis.



Thanks to networking, and the benefits of information sharing, the group soon grew to an average of four to seven Directors at each meeting, sharing strategies and discussing key issues around CTE.

As the group was growing, Nikki Lester, CTE Director of District 49, was overseeing some positive developments of her own: Thanks to the visionary leadership of District 49 Chief Education Officer Peter Hilts, the district was prepared to make an investment in work-based learning by hiring a Workplace Learning Manager. In the summer of 2017, that position was filled by Bob Gemignani, who was hired on a full-time basis to identify and establish work-based learning opportunities across the district's service area.

If you were going to hire a work-based learning leader, it would be difficult to find someone more suited for the role than Bob Gemignani: He had spent 25 years in the Colorado Springs area in various sales and marketing positions before searching for a position in education. He wasn't able to find a suitable position during his initial search: Instead, he found an opportunity in 2012 with the Pikes Peak Workforce System, which gave him excellent experience with the workforce development system in general, and with programs for disadvantaged youth in particular. Five years later, when the Workplace Learning Manager position was created and posted, he was again interested in finding a way to enter the education field, and brought his list of contacts and his expertise in workforce development and youth programs into this new role.

Bob immediately set to work, establishing relationships with numerous businesses interested in providing opportunities ranging from guest speaking to internships. He was able to identify so many opportunities, in fact, that he began discussing this challenge with Nikki Lester, and they quickly realized that there could be a connection between the established group of CTE directors and the need to fill the opportunities identified by District 49.

A COMMUNITY-WIDE APPROACH TO WORK-BASED LEARNING

When Chief of Education Peter Hilts was brought into the discussion, he reaffirmed his commitment not only to work-based learning in District 49, but as a core need for students across their region. Working with his staff and with leaders in other districts (including personally attending several of the CTE Director meetings), he agreed that District 49 would not only share these work-based learning opportunities with their counterparts across the area, but that the district would also build an online tool to automate the process to the extent possible.

Bob Gemignani led an effort to build out a Workplace Learning area on the [District 49 website](#), which described the effort and provided links to parents, students, and industry members with detailed information on the importance of work-based learning along with a searchable area for job shadowing and internship opportunities. They started with a focus on opportunities with advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and construction, and are expanding coverage to other key economic drivers in the region. Bob continues to take the lead in identifying and engaging employer partners, though several others from D49 and their partner districts focus on this as well.

CREATION OF THE PIKES PEAK BUSINESS & EDUCATION ALLIANCE

Of course, while their partner districts greatly appreciated District 49's leadership and support, they also realized that a community-wide initiative housed within the website of a single district was not sustainable, both for branding and for the amount of resources it required of that district. Discussions

within the CTE Directors' group quickly turned to building an independent, community-wide entity, and the Pikes Peak Business & Education Alliance was born.

The Alliance is still in its formative stages, and still relies on District 49 to promote and manage work-based learning opportunities. Thanks to an [initial grant of \\$65,000 from TalentFound, The Colorado Talent Development Network](#), as administered by the Colorado Advanced Manufacturing Association (CAMA), however, they have a solid financial footing for managing their initial activities. Uses for this finding are still being determined.

Participating CTE Directors agree that the group will ultimately need to have its own nonprofit status (501c3), and that a dedicated website – not dependent on the efforts of a single district – is a necessity. Two areas considered to be a top priority now include ensuring that work-based learning documents are consistent, so that every experience is a high-quality and consistent one, and so that a business partner doesn't have to review 17 different partnership agreements, write 17 different internship descriptions, and use 17 different sets of evaluation tools. Participants are also strongly considering how the group can support regional advisory boards, so that businesses don't have to commit to multiple CTE programs in order to share similar or identical thoughts again and again.

FUTURE PLANS AND LESSONS LEARNED

While currently still operating under the District 49 banner, project participants are building the infrastructure that will be needed once the group is fully developed and launched as a standalone entity. Part of this includes further development of consistent materials; another involves identifying a staffing structure (as Bob Gemignani notes, this effort would not be sustainable solely as a volunteer operation); and third priority involves the development of a dedicated website for the organization, which will need to include a searchable engine of opportunities. All of this work will require ongoing funding; while the TalentFound grant was generous and greatly appreciated, it only represents a starting point for what will need to be a sustained fundraising effort.

In addition to building awareness and connections with industry, Bob Gemignani notes the importance of also reaching out to internal partners, including school administrators and teachers. He notes that this kind of project only works when all partners are making contributions and getting benefits, so the development team will be focused on connecting educators and ensuring that all work-based learning experiences are of high quality.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information, visit [the District 49 Workplace Learning website](#) or contact Bob Gemignani, Workplace Learning Manager, at rgemignani@d49.org.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit <http://coloradostateplan.com/>.

