



The Village Comes Together

By Sally Chapman Cameron

Where might you find a crowd of southeastern Massachusetts educators the last week before the school year begins, or on one of the last lovely October Saturdays?

If you said meeting together for professional development, you would be correct. And if you added that the professional development was totally funded by businesses and related foundations, you would get extra credit for recognizing the close tie between business and education in this region.

This one-of-a-kind joint venture demonstrates the commitment and support of the business community to promote educational attainment through the Chamber. The professional development sessions aimed to give PreK through high school educators in local school districts and the Diocese of Fall River the chance to meet with colleagues and learn about social issues that affect their classrooms. What is particularly noteworthy is the region-wide opportunity to meet with educators from around the region.

This is what can happen when business and community folks step up. Attendees at the October day-long session expressed appreciation for this concrete evidence of backing. "It's great to have this support," said Kristen Ferreira, preschool teacher from Mark Hoyle Elementary in Swansea. "It makes me feel like we matter, that children matter, to the business community."

This effort was another outcome of the active Education Committee of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce, chaired by President and CEO of BayCoast Bank, Nick Christ. Taking the view that educational attainment is the primary driver in the economic growth of this region, the committee has been working for several years to increase support and educational attainment in the region.

The committee helped forge the partnership with other groups that have a stake in education as a quality-of-life issue for southeastern Massachusetts. Those partners included BayCoast Bank, the Bristol County District Attorney's Office, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and the Carney Family Foundation, all who contributed to both the week-long training in August and the day-long event in October.

A region-wide planning group of educators worked together to devise what was covered, centering on how to most effectively reach students, all of whom face a changing world that creates a challenging social-emotional environment that affects learning. Workshops on trauma, systems to address students'

holistic needs, cyber safety, and avoiding and recognizing substance abuse are just some of the real-world problems teachers face in the classroom and can affect students' success. Material focused on giving educators resources and information to account for these challenges and keep students moving ahead.

This taking-the-long-view effort can have a significant impact on the economic climate of the region. One of the key factors companies consider when choosing to set up shop is the quality of the schools, the level of educational attainment, and the skills of the potential workforce, now and in the future. More immediately for businesses already located here and facing regional, national, and global competition, well-educated children grow up to be a pool of nimble employees earn more, have stable jobs, be more productive, and help our region thrive.

More than 300 educators from public, charter, and Catholic schools gathered on their own time to strengthen student learning and enable their students to be successful. Partners in the community made it possible. These pieces of the puzzle of economic development for our region deserve attention and support.

The writer is a member of the Education Committee for the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce.