

Focus on high-tech grows in county

School districts, colleges reaching out to industry leaders

By TOM VOGT

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Clark County's biggest educational agencies are nourishing STEM starts, with the hope of seeing high-tech opportunities blossom.

In education, STEM is shorthand for science, technology, engineering and math. Local K-12 school districts are working with Clark College, Washington State University Vancouver and Educational Service District 112 on a regional approach to high-tech education.

They hope their collaboration will attract partners in industry that are looking to hire skilled workers; those businesses could help educate some of their own future employees by providing mentors and internship opportunities.

Clark College President Bob Knight said he will make a presentation at a February meeting of the Clark County High Tech and Community Council.

Speaking at a recent joint meeting of the Clark and Evergreen Public Schools boards, Knight said his pitch will be along the lines of: "This is what we have going; what do you want?"

The concept isn't just a set of loosely connected talking points. Industries, looking to hire employees with better high-tech skills, already are reaching out to local educators.

"I've had opportunities to work with three high-tech firms, at their invitation," said Evergreen Superintendent John Deeder.

"We're very proactive," said Rob Bernardi, chairman of the industry council. "One of our initiatives is education."

"We just had a quarterly high tech council meeting, with an update from SEH America on their work with the Vancouver school district," said Bernardi, who is president and chief operating officer of Kokusai Semiconductor. "It was very impressive."

Industries are really motivated to make this sort of collaboration work, Bernardi added.

"Kokusai spends nine months, minimum, training new hires before they're productive," Bernardi said. "It's probably the same with the other companies."

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In addition to building relationships, the county's biggest education agencies are in various stages of building classroom facilities to match the mission of high-tech ed.

Washington State University Vancouver unveiled its new Engineering and Computer Science Building a month ago.

Evergreen Public Schools is early in the process of building a \$16 million health and bioscience high school near PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center.

Clark College hopes to start work in 2015 on a 70,000-square-foot, \$36 million building for science, technology, engineering and math.

Vancouver Public Schools is scheduled to take its next step at Tuesday's board meeting. The agenda includes a recommendation to approve its magnet STEM School of Choice for the 2012-2013 school year, if the budget cooperates.

However, separate facilities and programs — operating in isolation — aren't the way to achieve the goal, Knight said in Clark's joint session with Evergreen's school leaders.

"We don't want us to be in a silo, or your medical magnet to be in a silo," Knight said.

"Business partners don't want to address individual schools. They want a coordinated effort," said Todd Horenstein, Vancouver's assistant superintendent for facility support services.

That goes for financial partners, too, when it comes to seeking grants.

"The more we can approach it in a coordinated regional way, the stronger we will be," Horenstein said.

Horenstein and Anne Kennedy, director of STEM education at ESD 112, are co-leaders of Vancouver's STEM planning program.

Vancouver envisions a gradual rollout of its STEM program that won't require building a new school immediately. Students in grades six through 12 would spend the whole day there — similar to the Vancouver School of Arts and Academics — and take all their classes, not just the magnet courses.

Partnerships with Clark College and WSUV would smooth the path to college. However, STEM education also would benefit students who aren't looking at college.

Local high-tech manufacturers "spend more money and time than they prefer to get entry-level technicians up to speed," Bernardi said.

If some students decide to enter the workforce instead of college, Bernardi said, "They can hit the ground running."