Envisioning one’s future doesn’t happen overnight. It’s the culmination of academic, personal, family, and real-life work experiences. In Collier County, 30 percent of high school seniors report that they don’t know what they’ll do after scoring that hard-earned diploma. To fuel post-graduation success and improve students’ academic engagement and achievement, Future Ready Collier—a partnership of 60 local organizations—is focused on both ends of the educational spectrum. Academic and career accomplishment begin with ensuring our littlest ones entering kindergarten are ready to read, so they begin their learning journey on a firm footing. But we have a lot of work to do locally. According to Champions For Learning, Future Ready Collier’s backbone agency, less than half of Collier students—45.7 percent—were ready for kindergarten in 2019.

Many local students come from households where they will be the first in their family to go on to secondary education. By many metrics, academic success and expanded education are directly connected to their wellbeing and Collier County’s economy. Higher-paying jobs today and in the future demand higher levels of training and education, and a skilled local workforce will ensure a diverse, robust local economy.

“The only way out of poverty is education,” said Community Foundation CEO/President Eileen Connolly-Keesler. “A lot of kids are the first generation in their family going to school, so their parents don’t have the experience or resources to send them to a university or a technical program. Higher training and education lead to better-paying careers, so it doesn’t change just one life but future generations. Typically, their kids will go onto further education, too.”

The Community Foundation of Collier County has collaborated with other local leaders, nonprofits, advocates, and agencies to create innovative partnerships to tackle education challenges and push forward initiatives to diversify and build the local workforce and economy. In the past two years, the Community Foundation has already distributed $600,576 through 46 competitive program grants to 21 local organizations on these issues’ frontlines.

Today, the foundation is leading the charge to create a $3 million fund targeted specifically for bolstering education, which is directly connected to employment, as part of its new Your passion. Your Collier. capital campaign.

The Community Foundation provided the first $50,000 in funding for the Future Ready initiative in 2015 and has funded it $50,000 each year since to provide a paid staff position at Champions For Learning for coordination. Connolly-Keesler serves on the steering committee of Future Ready, which tracks local statistics, needs, and gains in education, beginning with early learning and through to college preparedness.

The education and employment fund will also support the number of technical, vocational, and career-focused opportunities to build the local workforce and stimulate economic development and diversity, and importantly, increased scholarships.

The Community Foundation has been lending local students a hand-up since it began distributing scholarships 29 years ago. In that time, it has helped more than 1,600 students with $7.1 million in scholarships. And the demand is increasing, according to Community Foundation Vice President of Community Engagement Lindsey Touchette. In 2020, there was a 37 percent increase in scholarship distributions over the previous year: $1.4 million total, with the average award of $2,500 going to 307 students who earned one or more awards. Applications also increased 41 percent compared to 2019.
There is a lot of need in our community. We want to ensure that our students are prepared, and our students are qualified for the types of jobs and positions that are available in the community and the state,” Touchette said. “We can help them not to have to hold down two or three jobs, and work full-time and go to school to excel in their studies, come out debt-free, and come back to Collier County, have a successful career, and raise their families. So, our funding is important.

Connecting students to scholarship opportunities is the first step to ensuring post-secondary success. The Community Foundation of Collier has prioritized providing scholarships for local, state, and national scholarships to our students for the first 10 years of the Chamber’s efforts. We have complete one application and be considered for scholarships for up to 47 scholarship funds managed by the Community Foundation of Collier.

Students may also visit the Scholarship Connector, a centralized search engine that sifts through 390 local, state, and national scholarships to match criteria with the student’s information. Touchette said that she and her team look for students not just looking for opportunities they can apply to.

Your passion. Your Collier. campaign’s education and employment fund breaks down as 37 percent to local, state, and national scholarships to our community through the Collier Scholars Common Application and the Partnership Connector. The Collier Scholarship Common Application (CSA) is a centralized application for scholarships that students complete one application and be considered for scholarships for up to 47 scholarship funds managed by the Community Foundation of Collier.

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The greatest need is to help adults and youth to upgrade their skills for not just a job of today but for the future,” Dalby said. These industries are projected to grow the most (indicated by percentages) according to the Workforce Development Board, in the five-county Southwest Florida region through 2027:

- Education and Health Services – including educational services, ambulatory health care, nursing and residential care facilities, and social assistance - 16.8 percent
- Professional and Business Services - 13.6 percent
- Construction – including specialty trades - 14.6 percent
- Government – particularly local government - 15.4 percent
- Leisure and Hospitality – including hospitality and food service - 13.5 percent

Collaborations to Boost Income and Strengthen Workforce,

Several organizations are working to ramp up students’ career prospects. Future Ready Collier is a partner in the regional Future Makers Coalition, which aims to transform the Southwest Florida workforce by increasing the number of college degrees, certificates, or other credentials from 27 percent to 55 percent by 2025. There is a statewide Florida College Access Network effort called Goal 2025, which aims to increase the proportion of working-age adults in Florida who hold a high-quality post-secondary degree or credential to 60 percent by 2025. “Education ties right into employment and what businesses will come here based on the skills we have in our workers,” Connolly-Keesler said.

The Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce is working with innovative real-world work-based experiences for local high school students so they will understand the types of professional opportunities that exist in Collier County and envision their futures here. Alex Breault directs the Chamber’s work-based, learning program, coordinating internships, mock job interviews, site visits, shadow days, and classroom speakers with Collier County Public Schools (CCPS), local businesses, and local colleges. It’s a wide-ranging effort. Breault is the go-between for an array of post-secondary institutions and organizations to create unique events and educational opportunities. Despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic, he worked with more than 170 businesses and 113 educators last year to provide some work-based experiences for 2,834 students.

Last year, more than 220 high school students participated in internships—100 more than the previous year. Many students have part-time jobs that were not part of the internship program. Breault said: Because of the pandemic, she took extra steps to work with those employers to turn those jobs into internships, becoming a win-win for all. “The employer had to come on board to participate,” she said. “It helps them too, because now they can see students not as someone who is just getting a after-school job but as an employee who can build their career here.”

She is in close communication with Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida SouthWestern State College, Hodges University, Florida Atlantic University, Southeast Florida Technical Partnership, Immokalee Foundation, and others. She coordinates the annual Naples Children’s Business Fair which was canceled in 2020 due to the pandemic. In 2019, there were 109 booths featuring student businesses, and more than 220 students participated, including many homeschooled and private-school students.

The Chamber and these other organizations are focused on strengthening “social capital for our community,” Breault explained. “I put the professional in front of the students to talk about their careers. If they were born and raised here and came back, we want to highlight that so the students can see that career pathway. Our goal is to start that dialogue with the student and their parent, counselor, or educator. What spark will their interest in building a career? How can we lead them onto that pathway? One of our top priorities is building workforce pipeline to ensure that employers have access to high-quality talent. A significant focus of the Chamber is developing a new training center. One of the projects that is being funded by the one-cent sales surtax. Collier County voters approved in 2018 will be a $15 million career and technical training center. Though its location has not been chosen, planning began a few years ago, when Hodges University and the Greater Naples Chamber conducted a workforce skills training study supported by an $85,000 grant from the Community Foundation. The study explored the feasibility of a new technical “school of the future” that will provide more options in Collier County and determine the types of high-wage jobs in demand elsewhere that could be launched in Collier.

“The voters’ voice and the continued adult and youth interest in vocational training to build the economic and life skills to move into career pathways that are aligned with the skill sets of our community is spurring us forward to get to this site determined, outfit the programs and open the doors to the public as soon as possible,” Greater Naples Chamber President/CEO Michael Dalby said.

NCH Healthcare System recently purchased the 166,000-square-foot, former Naples Daily News building in the Creekside Commerce Park for administrative support functions. There are plans to convert some of the space it doesn’t need into a training location. “There have been discussions of NCH making a part of the building available for the voter-approved, sales tax-funded, career technical training. A portion of the building could be a portion of the training offered, the space offers the potential for all sorts of innovative and higher-skill, higher-wage and in-demand technical training,” Dalby said. The ultimate goal of expanding training options is “to help adults and youth to upgrade their skills for not just a job of today but for the future,” Dalby said.

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Job placement rate, while Lorenzo Walker's is 80 percent. iTech has a 90 percent high demand in Southwest Florida, ranging from nursing to heavy equipment to auto mechanics.

Excellence in Golden Gate City to keep pace with or much less, even two months. There is also a “career in a year” while others more time.

Some students “get their unmanned aircraft license” before they get their driver’s license,” she noted. One student launched a real estate drone aerial company after assessing their diploma. An aeronautical dual enrollment partnership with Emory Riddle University means students can earn a bachelor’s degree at the same time as their tech school diploma. Students learn the Canvas online learning platform, which is used at 90 percent of Collier’s K-12 schools.

CCPS offers 26 NAF academies in six fields: aviation, entrepreneurship and finance, engineering, IT, and hospitality and tourism. About 1,000 high school students participate in an academy. Noting that 95 percent of the businesses in Collier County are small businesses, Dr. Patton said she has made sure that entrepreneurship and engineering are taught in middle school and in all high schools.

“If students don’t become engineers or entrepreneurs, the skills they learn in those classes are transferrable to most careers,” she said. The NAF academies align with “industries in our region,” she said, and they enable students to leave school with credentials they can expand upon in their post-secondary education or take into the workforce. It also offers dual enrollment so juniors and seniors can earn college credits or an associate’s degree at the same time as their diploma. An aeronautical dual enrollment partnership with Emory Riddle University means some students “get their unmanned aircraft (drone) pilot’s license before they get their driver’s license,” she noted. One student launched a real estate drone aerial company after completing property damage following Hurricane Irma in 2017, she said.

The two technical and vocational schools—Lorenzo Walker and iTech in Immokalee—offer 45 combined career-training programs. Some are a “career in a year” while others more time or much less, even two months. There is also a satellite, state-of-the-art Center for Manufacturing Excellence in Golden Gate City to keep pace with the region’s growing manufacturing sector.

“Both colleges represent all the jobs that are in high demand in Southwest Florida, ranging from nursing to heavy equipment to auto mechanics to IT and computer programming,” said iTech Director Donn Oxender. iTech has a 90 percent job placement rate, while Lorenzo Walker’s is 80 to 85 percent depending on the program. “All students exit debt-free, and there are a variety of scholarship opportunities,” Oxender said.

Oxender said the tech schools work closely with local companies, such as Arthrex and Pelican Wire, while heavy equipment giant Caterpillar has donated more than $1 million in support to iTech’s heavy and diesel equipment technician program, which has a 100 percent placement rate, he added. Not all of the state’s 67 counties have tech schools, and in some are not run by local companies, and in some are not run by local companies, such as the Caterpillar donation.

Dr. Patton is thankful for the Community Foundation’s commitment to local education. “The Community Foundation is one of the strongest partners in taking the lead,” she said. “It demonstrates the community’s investment in careers and education.”

She appreciates its funding and guidance for Future Ready Collier, which informs CCPS’s strategic plan and has led to innovative programs and initiatives to close the achievement gap.

“Superheroes Work Here” campaign at the end of 2020 to thank everyone, from bus drivers and janitors to teachers and principals, for their persistence in the pandemic. She said the Community Foundation was also instrumental in opening the doors” two years ago so that the technical schools can receive outside funding, such as the Caterpillar donation.

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The school system faced three major crises in recent years—Hurricane Irma, rapid safety advancements following the Parkland school shooting, and the pandemic— and the Community Foundation has come to our rescue many times. They want to know how they can help.”

state and national averages. Thirty-nine percent of households are living on survival budgets or at the federal poverty level, according to Vital Signs.

College, Career and Life Ready

Talk with CCPS Superintendent Kamela Patton, Ph.D., about how schools are preparing the system’s 47,000 students for their futures, and she can point to a slew of ways they are guiding local youth to be “college, career, and life-ready.”

“We feel we’re part of the economic drivers for our community,” Dr. Patton said. Students have opportunities for advanced programs beginning in elementary, so “it’s a pre-K through 20 years of age” continuum.

In her nine years, Dr. Patton has helped raise graduation rates by 19.9 points to 92.2 percent, which is impressive given that 55 percent of the students entering the system come from households where English is not the primary language. She has ensured every student is equipped with a computer and internet connection. Students learn the Canvas online learning platform, which is used at 90 percent of Collier’s K-12 schools.

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Community Foundation staff and their families, including Addisyn and Gavin Touchette pictured here, placed Superheroes Work Here signs across Collier County from Immokalee to Everywhere City to thank schools and NCH Healthcare System for their dedication to excellence during the pandemic.
A few years ago, the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation undertook an initiative with the Community Foundation and 30 other community partners to listen and respond to our community’s needs. Together, we completed a comprehensive Community Needs and Assets Assessment, which paints a clear picture of our residents’ obstacles and gaps in support services.

As a direct result, the Community Foundation has launched the $15.5 million Your passion. Your Collier. campaign to directly tackle six identified fields of significant concern: mental health and substance abuse, housing and hunger, education and employment, seniors and veterans, environment and accessibility, and crisis and disaster relief.

“Studies are pointless unless we follow them up with action,” said Community Foundation President/CEO Eileen Connolly-Keesler. However, she emphasizes that the Community Foundation has no intention of tackling these issues alone. “We are responding to what the community, government, and nonprofits have said they value and care about. We’re just the conduit to make sure the projects happen the way they’re supposed to happen.”

The goal is to have the donations or pledges wrapped up by the end of the year. “Nothing can move forward without the community’s support,” she said. “It’s a community effort.”

Follow your passion!
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