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Forward Wayne County Releases Teen Workforce Chat Report

Wayne County, Indiana– Forward Wayne County (FWC) released the Teen Workforce Report after several months of data collection and aggregation. Key themes that students shared are that work culture drive outcomes and that they are watching how employers treat employees as a determinant if they will work for them in the future.

Members of FWC’s Employability Coalition spent time at all five public county high schools talking with juniors about their relationship to work. These students were selected to participate based on aspects you would find in a typical employment setting: diversity, individual performance, education level, social skill, and gender.

Each of the 50 participating students were asked questions about their thoughts on work, what they need to be successful in a job, what employers need to know about working with young people, and whether or not the students want to remain in Wayne County past graduation. Only 6 students stated that they are going to remain in Wayne County, while the other 44 students responded maybe (27) or no (17).

“These students were ready to talk about work, and what they said was eye-opening,” shared Acacia St. John, Program Director for Forward Wayne County. “We have some work to do to flip some of those 44 students to the yes side. We have work to do in promoting our employers, the amenities Wayne County has to offer, and changing their impressions that there is nothing to do here.”

Some of the reasons students are opting to leave Wayne County include the lack of perceived opportunities, low wages, and lack of entertainment opportunities for younger generations. Students who answered “maybe” or “yes” cited that they may want to remain in Wayne County due to the low cost of living, feeling of comfort and familiarity and closeness to family. Others noted that they would like to leave the area for college and may come back after their education.

When asked about what students need to be successful in work, many of them shared that a company’s culture is the most important factor when deciding where to work. Participating students noted that they feel successful in a job that provides flexibility, respect, and a patient environment for them to learn. They also shared that employers could help them become better workers through mentorship, good management, and fairness.

When students are successful in a job, they build relationships and self-esteem, learn how to manage money, and hone their social skills. However, many students noted that they feel like “work mules” – that employers are disrespectful, overwork them, and not pay them equally as other workers because they are high school students.

“Student workers are watching what employers say and do. They will speak up for themselves and others. They shared that they are willing to put in the work, but they expect the same from the employer.”

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At the beginning of each session, each group of students was asked to compile a list of their top “work values” – what they want to see in the company they work for. While each school’s answers varied slightly, each work values list had surprising similarities. The aggregated top five work values for Wayne County’s high school juniors are:

1. Respect
2. Accountability
3. Responsibility
4. Commitment
5. Fairness

Finally, students want employers (and everyone else for that matter) to know that they do have a work ethic. It was repeated from all five schools: “We are not lazy. We want to work, but work is not our life. We’ll put in the hours, but we also want to be teenagers.”

The Teen Workforce Chats were sponsored by Eastern Indiana Works and the Wayne County Foundation. The Employability Coalition employer representatives from Belden, IU East, Neighborhood Health Center, Primex Plastics, and Reid Health provided swag for the students.

The aggregated Teen Workforce Chat report can be found [here](#). The top, aggregated responses are bolded under each question.

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