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News & Features

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Program gives teens career advice, possible Hy-Vee job

BY SARAH BZDEGA

For Justin Edwards, 18, participating in the Hy-Vee Academy last summer taught him skills for getting a job and landed him part-time work as a bagger at the company's Euclid Avenue supermarket. For Wes Snook, store manager of Hy-Vee Inc.'s Ankeny location, the program allowed him to give back to the community, help attract a more diverse work force to the company and better understand the situations some of the applicants who apply to work at his location may face.



Hy-Vee Inc. store managers work with teenagers in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Iowa on how to fill out an application, write a resume and other skills for obtaining a job with Hy-Vee once they graduate from the program. Photo submitted

Entering its third year, the Hy-Vee Academy, a joint venture between Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Iowa and Hy-Vee, is designed to give teenagers in the club practical career knowledge, such as how to look for jobs, fill out an application and interview with a potential employer. At the end of the program, students have a chance to apply and interview for a position with one of the 10 Hy-Vee store managers who teach the class.

The academy has been somewhat successful, with classes filling up with about 25 students each session but only a handful going on to actually work for Hy-Vee. However, Sam Carrell, executive director of the local Boys and Girls Club chapter, says by giving the teens a real-life application for the material, they can better see career possibilities and have an improved understanding of how to get a job in the future.

"We serve a lot of the kids that are the ones that if we weren't here, they wouldn't be graduating from high school," he said. "They wouldn't be able to command a living wage. So a lot of our programming is to help them position themselves so they can indeed do that, and this is a way where you entice them, I think, and it's the foundation for, OK, now let's start exploring some of the other things that you have talent and interest in."

The program also could achieve more positive results now that it is taking place in the spring rather than summer, giving students a chance to get a summer job. The next session starts on May 7 and will run for six weeks.

As changes like this refine the program, Hy-Vee is considering rolling it out to other communities in the Midwest and even teaming up with other groups in Central Iowa. Boys and Girls Clubs are using it as a basis from which to work more with teenagers on career exploration and planning.

On board

The concept for the Hy-Vee Academy sprang from the Boys and Girls Clubs' national Career Launch program, but Carrell felt that teens would be more

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interested in the material if it had a real-life application - that the resumes and applications they would fill out would apply to getting a specific job.

Hy-Vee was the first business he approached with the idea, and the company not only agreed to participate, but all 10 store managers volunteered to work with Boys and Girls Clubs to customize the material and lead the class.

José Amaya, director of diversity for Hy-Vee, said his company liked the idea as a way to reach out to diverse communities and get them thinking about a career with Hy-Vee. The grocery chain also was able to customize the material to develop a signature program that it can use with other organizations.

Before a session begins, Amaya said, the Boys and Girls Clubs and Hy-Vee staffs spend 10 to 12 hours preparing. Each week during the class, managers spend more time than the two hours in the classroom planning and checking on students to make sure they are doing their homework.

The store managers "are very engaged," Carrell said. "It's a huge time commitment on their part."

Snook said he has done similar presentations at local schools and for Junior Achievement, "so it was easy to reach back to some of the things we did before and build a curriculum. Mostly we just asked ourselves, what is it that would help these people the most to get a job?"

Changes over the past two years have made the program run smoother. An interview process was added after the first year to help ensure that the students in the academy were motivated to attend. The program has been changed to six two-hour classes from eight one-hour classes, and an icebreaker session has been added on the first day to get the store managers and teens more comfortable with one another earlier. Program leaders also are working on a post-academy support group to allow teens to discuss and work through any issues they may face once they get a job with Hy-Vee.

Edwards said that he participated in the Hy-Vee Academy to learn how to get a job. He was already working for Boys and Girls Clubs but still learned things such as making sure to fill out an application more than once to show interest in a job and to have good posture and eye contact during an interview.

His favorite lessons were a field trip to the Anderson Erickson Dairy plant and when the store managers acted out different interview scenarios - from a cellphone ringing during the meeting to someone showing up in shorts and a T-shirt - to demonstrate what not to do.

"I thought it was going to be boring, but it was great," he said.

Lessons learned

The biggest lesson teens gain from the academy, Carrell said, is understanding the transaction of employment - that it is not just about getting a paycheck, but that the work someone provides brings value to the company. For store managers like Snook, it has helped them realize why some applicants might not put a telephone number on an application (if they don't have a phone) or why they might act a certain way during an interview.

"I'm going to say I probably learned just as much as the kids learned, if not more," Snook said, some of which he has shared with people responsible for hiring at his store.

The program also has led Carrel to consider other ways to work with the club's members on exploring career possibilities and connecting them with training and jobs that will help them achieve those goals.

"So many of our kids don't read at a grade level that's appropriate. So a lot of our supplements are on literacy skills and things like that," he said. "This would be much more, hey, the reason why you want to keep coming to club is you want to be this and we can help you get there, which takes an investment by you."

In a recent project, 12 members of the Logan Boys & Girls Club revamped a run-down van into a work of art that could also be used again. "All of a sudden some kids had some real skills as mechanics, some of them real skills as artists," Carrell said, as an example of how to encourage them to pursue those interests as careers.

The Hy-Vee Academy also has inspired Boys and Girls Clubs in Dubuque, the Quad Cities, Kansas City and Omaha to want to start a similar program, Amaya said, but Hy-Vee is waiting to make sure this program is well-established before expanding. He also is considering ways to reach out to other groups in the community, such as college students, with a similar program tailored to their needs.

"This is to a certain extent some uncharted ground for us," he said.

Though Snook has not hired anyone from the Hy-Vee Academy yet, he said, "I feel like we've made a difference with the kids. ... I like to hope that the help we gave them, if that doesn't help them get hired by Hy-Vee, (they will) remember it when they do apply to get a job."

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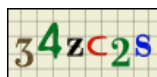
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