

The Future of Education

School District of Janesville and Forward Janesville partner to prepare students for a bright future

By Laura Barten



In 2022, leaders from both the School District of Janesville (SDJ) and Forward Janesville (FJI) gathered to discuss the intersection between education and workforce development—specifically, how might they work together to better prepare local students for long-term success in the face of changing workforce needs and priorities? This turned out to be the first of many meetings to come, what today is known as the SDJ/FJI Education Council.

“Workforce development is a number one issue for our member employers and arguably nothing is more important for workforce development than education,” said President and CEO of Forward Janesville Angela Pakes. “Workforce development doesn’t begin with your first job—it starts with students. Collaborating to enhance the educational experience in our community directly aligns with our mission as an organization. I’m thrilled that what began as informal talks turned into a formal collaboration, established via charter and a vote to demonstrate full support, taking our partnership with the School District of Janesville to the next level.”



Members of SDJ / FJI Education Council

Recent academic and policy research supports the conclusion that workforce development builds streamlined pathways to good jobs, and that the development of ecosystems of schools and local employers to expose teachers, students, and their families to a broad range of careers can change the trajectory.

“Over the last decade, we’ve seen a trend toward increased business involvement with a focus on entrepreneurship in education. We want to be nimble about the options we provide, always improving, and that entails being involved community partners. Working with Forward Janesville to develop a collaborative Education Council allowed us to expand our partnerships and hear directly from area business leaders about what matters most to them in today’s competitive environment. It’s been a powerful experience, and I see great things ahead,” said School District of Janesville Superintendent Mark Holzman.

In the spirit of creating a systematic and enduring way to address areas of opportunity, the SDJ/FJI Education Council, or EC for short, meets monthly to discuss how to collaboratively (1) enhance communication between the district and community, (2) support prioritized district goals, and (3) improve pathways for students to access community and work-based learning opportunities.

Each meeting of the EC touches on all four areas of opportunity (see sidebar Opportunities), while also allowing for a deep dive into any number of topics or programs that stem from the four opportunity areas. Despite being relatively early in the process, the EC is not short on accomplishments following its establishment. For example:

- In the spirit of increasing interaction between school district staff and local businesses, last year the SDJ asked FJI to help design and coordinate a “Welcome to Janesville” bus tour to introduce all new school district staff to our area. In August 2022, the first annual

Four opportunities were identified early on to shape discussions and guide EC goals, objectives, and work groups:

COMMUNICATION

As part of the SDJ/FJ collaboration, Forward Janesville works with the SDJ to promote and enhance communication between the district and the community, which empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated is critical to improved educational outcomes.

PATHWAYS TO CAREER & JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Collaboration between a school district and the community it serves is essential to ensure robust work-based learning opportunities are provided to students to develop the necessary skills for college and career, as well as feel engaged in and connected to their community.

TALENT RETENTION

EC’s collaborative efforts also create opportunities for the SDJ and FJI staff to engage with the community. This helps strengthen staff members’ understanding of and engagement with the larger long-term support system that exists within our community. It connects them in a much more direct manner with all our community has to offer individuals and families.

ACCOUNTABILITY & ADVOCACY

FJI advocacy on behalf of the district provides significant and highly visible influence to support and increase school funding in a non-partisan manner. Actively working together to secure state and federal funding sources to enhance student growth and achievement is a win-win for all parties.

“The partnership between FJI and SDJ is truly collaborative. We talk about thought leaders, but together we have become thought partners in pursuit of mutual goals, so that once our students graduate, they will want to remain here, make a smooth workforce transition...The shared vision is cradle-to-career.”

“Welcome” tour kicked off, with official stops at four local businesses—Prent Corporation, Universal Recycling Technologies, The Gazette Printing and Distribution Center, and Dollar General), complemented by drive-by highlights of our most beautiful local parks, public gathering spaces, historical points of interest, and downtown hot spots supported by area historians Tim Maahs and Rich Fletcher. Designed to attract and retain great talent, this EC-designed program will be an annual event, with 2023 tour plans in progress now.

- To advance its work-based learning program engagement, assist with training, and make appropriate placements, EC advocated for and supported a new role at the SDJ: a Work Based Learning Liaison. Erin O’Leary was selected to fill this position that helps motivate students to explore work-based learning opportunities, encouraging staff to build business partnerships in Rock County and work with key educational partners like BTC.
- The EC is also a strong proponent of existing programs designed to introduce students to the world of business. The School District of Janesville’s Global Business Academy, formerly known as the Elevate program, matches students with area businesses, organizations, nonprofits, and entrepreneurs, who provide guidance and mentorship as students participate in projects that build business skills in a real-world environment. Junior and senior high school students are eligible. The ED has been working to provide a space for this program downtown, the Janesville Business Hub, to better reflect a business environment and improve access to mentor meetings and business sessions, made possible through private donations.

The SDJ and FJI work hand-in-hand to cross-promote the council’s work. “The simple act of meeting monthly and keeping

each other up to date on what we’ve each been working on can inspire its own magic. Ideas are sparked that lead to in-depth discussions and innovative programs ideas for implementation down the road—opportunities for collaboration that otherwise could be missed,” said EC member and past FJI Board Chair Oakleigh Ryan of Whiton House. “It also allows us an opportunity to invite guests to talk about programs that relate to our council’s mission and are supporting our goal to improve education in our community, like investments in early learning and literacy or United Way and other non-profit supported programs, among others.”

SDJ Director of Learning and Innovation Allison DeGraaf agrees. “The EC is a thoughtful and supportive resource that helps everyone engage at a different level. Take the SDJ Early Literacy Coordinator position. Having the opportunity to bring in



Allison DeGraaf
SDJ Director of Learning and Innovation

a position like this, with the full backing of both internal and external stakeholders, is an enormous opportunity for our district with far-reaching effects.

Added Degraaf, “The partnership between FJI and SDJ is truly

collaborative. We talk about thought leaders, but together we have become thought partners in pursuit of mutual goals, so that once our students graduate, they will want to remain here, make a smooth workforce transition, and ultimately help strengthen our community as engaged partners welcoming in the next generation, completing the circle. The shared vision is cradle-to-career.”

In short, through the consistent sharing of information and open-minded innovation,

EC positions our community for a brighter future by ensuring young talent is fully prepared for tomorrow’s workforce.

Said Forward Janesville Board Chair David Hiller of Prent Corporation, “Our school system is paramount to the future of our community. Coupling the strengths of the business community and the school district can provide great outcomes. We have hardwired our communication through this council to ensure every month we are asking the question, how can we become stronger together.”

School District of Janesville Education Council Members

- Mark Holzman, Superintendent
- Allison DeGraaf, Director of Learning & Innovation
- Chris Medenwaldt, Director of Secondary Education
- Patrick Gasper, Public Information Officer

Forward Janesville Education Council Members

- George Cullen, JP Cullen
- Mary Fanning-Penny, United Way Blackhawk Region
- Dave Marshick, First National Trust & Bank
- Angela Pakes, FJI
- Dave Hiller, Prent
- Oakleigh Ryan, Whiton House

Thoughts? We know workforce development is a critical issue and we would love to hear from you.

Please feel free to send along ideas, questions, and/or requests for more information to Angela@ForwardJanesville.com.