

South central Michigan stakeholders partner to shape career/tech programs

“An economic tsunami”—that is how Randy Yagiela, a business services manager at South Central Michigan Works! and director of the Partnership for Regional Solutions, describes the situation in Michigan in recent years. Manufacturing firms have disappeared, unemployment rates have skyrocketed, and many of the state’s skilled workers have left. Nevertheless Yagiela and other local practitioners have found a way to start climbing out of the rut. With collaborative, data-driven planning between high school districts, area colleges, and economic/workforce development groups, the south central Michigan labor force is becoming more responsive to local industries.

Workforce report brings together decision makers

Since 2002, Pam Gosla, a research and education officer at South Central Michigan Works! (SCMW) in Hillsdale, has compiled an annual “State of the Workforce” report for the Jackson-Hillsdale-Lenawee County region. Filled with employment forecasts and data on the strengths and weaknesses of local industries, it was originally intended for economic developers. However, Gosla also presented the information to local education leaders, specifically superintendents at area high school districts. “They found the data to be extremely beneficial,” she says, “to be able to determine where they should invest money, especially in our vocational programs and where we might best suit planning for our K-16 programs to focus their attention.”

After the positive reception, Gosla and other local stakeholders came together and agreed that the right mix of comprehensive data and projections could be the foundation for collaborative strategic planning that the area desperately needed. While south central Michigan hasn’t been as hard-hit by the economic downturn as some regions in the state, it has its fair share of problems. Three of the biggest issues have been:

- 1) Hillsdale and Lenawee Counties rank in the top 10 for highest unemployment rates in the state. Both are at over 11% (the statewide rate was 10.6% as of December 2008).
- 2) Recently, about 2,000 manufacturing workers lost their jobs as a result of five plant closures in the two counties.
- 3) A number of local industries, like chemical processing, have grown, but face a shortage of skilled workers in the community.

“We’re trying to avoid getting blindsided and putting something into place so we can stave off those down cycles. ... And one of the very fundamental tools necessary to begin this process is having data such is provided by EMSI. ”

—Pam Gosla, research and education officer, South Central Michigan Works!

With all these factors converging, it didn’t take long for the partnership to start paying dividends, especially for the Lenawee Intermediate School District (LISD).

Shortage of skilled workers shows disconnect

Up until a few years ago, LISD didn’t have an up-to-date, regionalized data source it could rely on for employment trends. As a result, it struggled to adapt the offerings of its TECH Center to fit the needs of high-growth, high-demand industries. The center brings in high school students from 14 districts from around the region and offers a wide range of vocational training in areas like graphic design and computerized accounting. With such a large area to focus on, LISD officials saw a need to streamline the center’s programs using the labor market forecasts that Gosla and SCMW were presenting every year.

Because of the labor market forecasts, the center identified a lack of training for the chemical processing sector, which has seven major companies in Lenawee County alone. According to Alan Burg, LISD’s assistant superintendent for instruction, “In the last five years one of the larger new growth fields is the chemical processing industry and we didn’t have a course in that area.” With no educational avenues for students or displaced workers

looking for retraining, it was difficult for local chemical companies to find workers in the immediate area with the right skills.

Becoming responsive to labor market trends

After applying to the Department of Commerce's Economic Development Association as a distressed community in 2006, Lenawee County was awarded a \$50,000 grant to help with the economic revitalization. According to Yagiela, the money primarily went toward (1) reshaping the curriculum at the TECH Center to be responsive to the needs of the chemical companies, and (2) giving local teachers a chance to intern at local chemical companies, where they could glean firsthand knowledge for six weeks in the summer.

Since then, LISD has overhauled its biochemical technology program and built a 3,000-square foot industry-based biochemical lab. In addition, the center has joined forces with Jackson Community College (JCC), which now has a 27,000-square foot building connected to the center and has access to the same data. JCC offers a full host of adult learning services at the center. Of the center's 28 programs, 23 have articulation agreements with community colleges or universities—meaning that high school students can end up with college credit depending on how they fare. They can also dual-enroll and start building a college record.

Meanwhile, the biochem program has been such a big hit that several companies have contracted to use the center's labs and students to perform testing and research. One firm uses the center to analyze wastewater, while another small food company tests antibiotics in honey. "It actually puts the school district into a business format of bringing in income based on the changes they've made," Gosla says.

With the process well underway to fill the workforce gap in the chemical industry, stakeholders have shifted their efforts to other areas:

- **Advanced manufacturing**, another growth field in the region, has become a large focus. The center's machine trade and welding programs have been revamped and the labs gutted after the forecast data showed unfilled jobs in the advanced/lean side of the industry.
- The center's **auto services technology** program has been completely updated.
- LISD has expanded its **health services** program and now offers an initial health course so students can explore a long list of careers in the health sector. In addition, the center added a second year to its nursing prep program.

All these changes were based on a data-driven, collaborative approach. No longer are decisions formed by anecdotes or outdated trends. According to Gosla, "We're trying to avoid getting blindsided and putting something into place so we can stave off those down cycles. ... And one of the very fundamental tools necessary to begin this process is having data such as is provided by EMSI."

References and further reading

Jackson Community College at LISD TECH Center, <http://www.jccmi.edu/lenawee/index.htm>
Lenawee Intermediate School District, www.lisd.us.
South Central Michigan Works, <http://www.scmw.org>.

About EMSI

Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. (EMSI) is a professional services firm that offers integrated regional data, web-based analysis tools, data-driven reports, and custom consulting services. EMSI has served thousands of workforce, education, economic development, and other policy professionals in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom, and the company's web-based **Strategic Advantage** research and analysis suite is used by over 2,500 professionals across the U.S. For more information, call (866) 999-3674 or visit www.economicmodeling.com.