

Local schools tops in U.S.

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At a gathering saluting St. Johns County career academies on Thursday, businesspeople and educators saw just how effective the local program is.

First, Ford Motor Company Fund's education program named the district's career academy program one of the top six in the nation.

Second, the head of the Florida Masonry Apprentice and Education Foundation offered the student director of a career academies video a job producing a video to help improve the image of the masonry industry.

It was a perfect example of how engaging students' attention and teaching them real world skills can prepare students for the business world.

Cheryl Carrier, program director of Ford's 21st Century Education Programs, told the group her day at the academies "reaffirms everything we thought about this community ... what you are doing for your students and for community prosperity."

St. Johns County was designated as a Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies Next Generation Learning Community at the leadership level.

That translates into a \$25,000 grant and technical assistance from a team of experts in workforce development. It also offers professional development opportunities.

Carrier said Ford had been in the education business for a number of years, but with little fanfare. Founder Henry Ford helped in the establishment of some 70 schools, she said.

"They were all hands-on," Carrier said, adding if the "career academy" term had been around then that's what he would have called his schools.

Because of their experience with high school curriculum, the Ford company began getting involved in educational opportunities about a decade ago.

They decided they wanted to help design curriculum that was "engaging and exciting to students" and that curriculum would help students learn critical thinking, teamwork and other essentials for 21st century jobs, Carrier said.

"You don't get hired for those skills, but you get fired for them," Carrier

said, adding she'd learned that during three years in human resources.

School Superintendent Joe Joyner called the national recognition "special." But he didn't let the opportunity pass to remind his audience that "things are at risk" as education funding continues to be cut at the state level.

Academies will continue, Joyner said. "We just don't want to go backwards next year."

Jay Steele, who heads up the career academies program, said the academies have grown because of two levels of sponsorship. The first are the post secondary connections, which allows students to receive college credits.

"(But) the real linchpin is the business community ... coming in and having the desire to work with students," Steele said, noting there have been more than \$3 million in in-kind contributions in 2007-08.

The Ford leadership designation is going to only six districts in the nation. Four of them are in Florida.

"California is a trendsetter in academies. Florida is also; we don't always get the recognition for that," said program specialist Paula Chaon.

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