

Advancing career paths

Sen. Franken's staff tours Marshall Area Technical and Educational Center

[Local News](#)

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Photo by Karin Elton Sen. Al Franken's staff talked to certified nursing assistant students Wednesday at the Marshall alternative school.

MARSHALL — A U.S. senator's staff got the full meal deal Wednesday afternoon — they got treated to an excellent meal by Taher Foods and also learned how Marshall collaborates to get things done.

U.S. Sen. Al Franken's staff visited the Marshall Area Technical and Educational Center in Marshall as part of his office's statewide "Advancing Career Pathways Tour." The tour is designed to highlight efforts

around the state where employers and schools are forming partnerships to help prepare students for jobs of the future and to address the nation's skills gap.

Staffers Bree Maki, Dan Solomon, and Charles Sutton as well as Nola Speiser, director of the Office of Career Pathways from the Department of Employment and Economic Development toured MA-TEC's welding and certified nursing assistant certification programs and then discussed the value of school-business partnerships.

They heard from current and former CNA students, teachers and staff as well as officials from Minnesota West Community & Technical College, health care employers such as Pat Mellenthin of Prairie Home Hospice and Community Care and Jason Swanson, who is the director of four assisted living facilities, and others who discussed the collaborative efforts by community partners to help high school students and adults learn skills needed for jobs that are in-demand.

Michelle Noriega, MA-TEC assistant principal, said the collaboration among Marshall Public Schools, Adult Basic Education and others started from a need for services that were needed while not duplicating others' efforts.

"It doesn't make sense if we offer CNA classes and ABE offers them and the high school," she said. "By using the little resources available efficiency, we can get the best results."

ABE had been providing classes so the classes were moved to MA-TEC. Marshall Public Schools provided the space and ABE provided the equipment. The classes give college credit to high-school students and adults.

Pat Thomas of ABE said classes aren't full when it's just high school students or just adults. The classes are taught by instructors from Minnesota West and are every bit as rigorous as classes provided there.

"There is a perception that the classes are taught differently," said Dawn Regnier, the director of customized training at MinnWest. "But the rigor is the same."

"The difference is there might be language support (for some students)," said Thomas.

Franken staffer Solomon said they have been to high schools all around the state and this is the first one they have come across to "incorporate ABE."

Former MHS student Joana Villeda Pedroza is a certified nursing assistant at Prairie Home Hospice. She attended the CNA course as an adult and took the class with high school students. She felt an obligation to not give up.

"They helped keep me motivated," she said. "I felt if I quit, they would quit. I would tell them how hard life is if you don't have something (higher education)."

Villeda Pedroza is glad to be working at Prairie Home Hospice.

"I love my job," she said. "There's not a lot of people that can say that."

Thomas said the classes are often the first step for students. Some are assisted by employers to go further in their field and some go on to further education on their own.

The staffers and Marshall partners agreed that high school students will need higher education, but a four-year college degree is necessarily required, it could be a certificate or an associate's degree.

Brian Jones, MHS principal, said career classes have grown and more students are participating. They get their ideas for classes from DEED reports — on what kind of employees are needed.

“We are in the early stages of offering diesel technology classes and Mechatronics, which is general maintenance and manufacturing,” Jones said.

Solomon said he plans to take back all the information he has learned to Franken. He said Franken is a member of the Senate Education Committee and led a successful effort to expand Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education during last year's re-write of the nation's “No Child Left Behind” education law.

He also has been a leading Senate champion of efforts to close the nation's “skills gap,” which has left U.S. employers with millions of jobs they can't fill because they can't find enough trained workers.

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