

Education to Careers and Professions Program

Pathways Spotlight Briefs

pathways
resource center

Asia Fuller Hamilton, with Collaborating Educator Marc Changnon

Champaign Unit 4 School District

Grade Levels: PK-12

Students: 9,389

Schools: 16, including 2 high schools and 1 alternative school

Located between the major cities of Chicago, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, Champaign Unit 4 School District is one of the largest downstate districts in Illinois and includes portions of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign within its district boundaries. Its student body is racially and ethnically diverse. Approximately 6.6% of students are English Language Learners, and 57.1% are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch. For additional information regarding Champaign Unit 4 Schools (e.g., students and educator demographics, student achievement, revenues and expenditures), please visit the [Illinois Report Card site](#).

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ECP Internship participant and graduating high school senior highlighting her selected career path of Bio-Engineering.

Photo courtesy of Unit 4 School District.

Education to Career and Professions Program

In this brief, we describe the implementation of the Education to Careers and Professions (ECP) program in the Champaign Unit 4 School District.

Creating Career Pathways

When President Clinton signed the 1995 School-to-Work Act, educators in Unit 4 School District saw an opportunity to implement a program that would assist students in their educational and career journeys after high school. With support from both the State of Illinois and Unit 4 Board of Education, the principal of Centennial High School appointed a team of teachers to create a four-year plan for the ECP. The ECP has since expanded to include both Centennial and Central high schools, has included students in the three middle schools in the exploration phase, and the title has been amended to encompass professionals. The concept of ECP would allow educators to learn from students' (also considered clients) educational and career pursuits and to help students identify pathways to careers through postsecondary education, the military, or immediate entry into the workforce upon high school graduation. Educators partner with students as they determine how possible career and educational choices align with students' unique personalities, goals, value systems, skills, abilities, and interests.

Career exploration and preparation. Students in Unit 4 formally begin career exploration in the sixth grade by utilizing the Career Cruising program, completing an interest inventory assessment that provides a list of suggested careers. Students select from their recommended careers to create a portfolio that contains information on career pathways of interest. The Career Cruising portfolio moves with students as they matriculate through middle school and into high school.

High school students are provided an interest survey during freshman year that will help capture information on one of the six career interest areas they may want to focus:

- Business, Marketing and Management
- Engineering, Science and Technology
- Health Sciences
- Human Services
- Arts and Communication
- Agriculture and Natural Sciences

ECP Coordinator Marc Changnon and his assistant use the information to determine students' preliminary interests and forward that information to counselors who support students with academic course selections and electives that are aligned with their interests.

Sophomore year brings students the opportunity to conduct informational career interviews in their interest areas with a community partner. The interviews generally last about an hour and include a tour of the work environment. Mr. Changnon explained that the interviews provide students with an opportunity to see the real world of work, thereby better informing their career pathways decisions. Each sophomore is also given the Holland Personality test to assist counselors in identifying appropriate coursework for each student.

Once students move into their junior year, there is a shift from career exploration into career preparation. Each junior is given a Values in the Workplace assessment and is introduced to a graduation countdown planning tool that provides them with an overview of courses completed and remaining high school courses needed to pursue their career and postsecondary interests. Juniors can also take advantage of Career Mentoring, where they are paired with adult peers in their career interest area for a 5-6 month period.



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AT ILLINOIS

Education to Careers course. Seniors have the opportunity to apply for participation in the capstone ECP internship course. This project-based internship involves classwork and field-related work with the volunteer advisor who mentors the students throughout the internship. The program focuses on providing a rigorous experience that includes learning field-related skills and workplace skills, writing a research paper on the selected career field, and creating a project proposal in their career field. All students in this course present their final project to a variety of stakeholders including: the field supervisor, classroom teacher, parents, classmates, and the ECP director. Mr. Changnon stated the ultimate goal of the program is to have students graduate and when asked about their purpose of life to be able to articulate it. "If they can't, then we have failed them as a district," asserts Mr. Changnon.

Impact on students. The State of Illinois recognizes the ECP program as an exemplary career education program. Mr. Changnon noted that there are mechanisms in place for review; for example, each senior completes a course evaluation in which results are shared with all stakeholders. One of the ECP program's unique attributes is the commitment of the Unit 4 staff to ensure that all students have access to the program. Course evaluation data is one method used to determine if access to the program is provided to all interested students. Program administrators also are seeking to reinstate the exit interview that was once implemented in order to gain greater insight to how all aspects of the program function from the student viewpoint.

"We shouldn't stymie student dreams and aspirations, but demonstrate to them all aspects of that selected field and show them the pathways for themselves...Seek to care about every individual that you meet today, seek to understand them, and seek to serve them to the best of your ability in a sincere way. This is how you can get fulfillment."
~Marc Changnon, Director of Education to Careers and Professions program

Strengths of the program. One of the greatest strengths of ECP lies in the over 700 community partnerships, both individual and those within corporations, that have been built throughout the past 19 years. Mr. Changnon, pivotally, has conveyed to the community the need and desire of the school district to work with them, drawing support from major local business entities including Busey Bank, Carle Hospital, and Kraft. Mr. Changnon has spoken to educators around the state, and Danville High School has now adopted the program. Mr. Changnon is open to sharing information with any district interested in any aspect of ECP. The program is continually being refined and in Fall 2015, the district will partner with Parkland College and the regional Education for Employment office (EFE #330) to operate the "Early College and Career Academy" (ECCA). The ECCA will offer career and technical education (CTE) dual credit courses to high school students on the Parkland campus. The initial CTE course offerings will be in the areas of Automotive, Advanced Manufacturing, Computer Science, Health Professions-CNA & Emergency Medical Services, and Criminal Justice.

Advice from the field. Mr. Changnon identifies key points of advice for educators who seek to implement or refine a work-based learning program:

- **Leadership is key.** Support from district personnel and commitment and buy-in from staff are essential in building a viable program. The operation of the program cannot be done alone, and you need district leadership to back the work and invest in the program.
- **Building community partnerships is critical.** As educators begin to implement the program, most of the recruitment and facilitation may need to be conducted by one individual, but through perseverance the results will pay off. Once the program is running well, seek to hire an assistant to support the operational aspects of the program.
- **Actively advocate for students.** Mr. Changnon often uses the analogy of ECP being a GPS for students to find the career for which they will be best suited. There are times that that students may need to recalibrate based on their experience and talents, but educators and community partners are the support needed to help students reach their destination.

Champaign Unit 4 Schools – Illinois Interactive Report Card: <http://iirc.niu.edu/Classic/District.aspx?districtid=09010004026>
Education to Careers and Professions website: <http://www.champaignschools.org/pages/ecp/welcome>
Champaign Unit 4 School District website: www.champaignschools.org
Career Cruising website: www.public.careercruising.com

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This publication was prepared pursuant to a contract from the Illinois State Board of Education and is funded 100% through the federal Race to the Top grant. The total amount of federal funding involved is \$261.56, which represents 100% of the cost of producing the publication.

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Printed by the authority of the State of Illinois, October 2014 (400 copies, ISBE Contract Number 2012-06779).

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