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Proposal calls for additional teacher, new biomedical science class, $161,000 investment from industries

In response to demand from students and the industries that hope to hire them, Port Washington High School plans to make a substantial investment in its technology education department by hiring another teacher, launching a biomedical engineering program and asking area businesses to buy $161,000 in equipment for the school.

The investment — unique because it is likely to be made in elective courses at a time when schools are hesitant to add the financial burden of additional programs and teachers to their budgets, and because it is to be made in part by private industry — was endorsed by the Port Washington-Saukville School Board Personnel and Programs Committee Monday and is likely to be approved by the full board on Feb. 11.

Support for the initiative coincides with a tech-ed renaissance at Port High and Thomas Jefferson Middle School. Once referred to as shop class, tech ed has been reinvented in large part by Project Lead the Way, an industry-driven initiative to interest middle and high school students in, and train them for, careers in the fields of engineering, math and science.

“Tech ed today involves a lot more than making birdhouses and bookshelves,” Supt. Michael Weber said.

Since Project Lead the Way was introduced at the middle school four years ago and at the high school a year later, student demand for the elective courses has exceeded classroom space.

“Just like it did at the middle school, Project Lead the Way just took off when it was introduced in the high school,” Weber said.

Currently, the high school offers three Project Lead the Way courses — two engineering classes and digital electronics. A fourth engineering class will be added next year as part of a four-year plan.

The school has two tech-ed teachers, one of whom is certified to teach Project Lead the Way courses. Adding a third teacher to the department next school year will allow the school to offer Project Lead the Way courses more often and to more students, administrators said.

Administrators noted that because the district’s Project Lead the Way program has been accredited, students are eligible to earn college credit depending on the college and field of study they choose to pursue.

The high school also plans to add a biomedical science Project Lead the Way course to its offerings next school year. The course, which will be open to freshmen and sophomores, introduces students to physiology, genetics, microbiology and public health and engages students in activities like heart dissection, according to a course outline.

The new course, which would be taught by existing science teachers, will give students insights into careers in the growing health care industry, one that has a strong presence in Ozaukee County, administrators said.

“We have Aurora (Medical Center in Grafton) and Columbia St. Mary’s Hospital (in Mequon) — we’re literally surrounded by the health care industry,” Weber said.

The district’s increasing commitment to tech ed is not just being driven by student demand. Local industry, concerned by a shortage of skilled tradesmen that is projected to become dire within the next 15 years, recognizes that Port High can be a valuable asset.

Traditionally, the district has considered Port High a comprehensive high school, one that prepares students not just for four-year colleges but also for vocational schools, as well as apprenticeships and jobs directly out of high school. That philosophy appears to be paying off in the partnerships the district is forging with local companies.

One of those companies is Charter Steel, which operates a plant in Saukville.

“Within the next 15 years, we could lose 50 skilled tradespeople in four of our six departments,” Erin Spaeth, a senior human resources representative for Charter Steel, told the School Board last week. “We need to prepare now for their retirements. We recognize the need for community outreach and to build partnerships with local schools.”

The partnership with Charter Steel and other large companies — among them Modern Equipment in Port Washington and GenMet and Telsmith Inc., both of which have headquarters in Mequon — are being fostered by the district’s STEM Committee, whose mission is to work with businesses to promote interest in science, technology, engineering and math.

“Our business partners know their investments in our schools are going to pay off with more skilled workers,” Weber said. “And we know that one of the best places to prepare people for skilled jobs is in high school because this is where young people are developing the interests they will pursue the rest of their lives.”

The district has already received support from its business partners in the form of monetary contributions and job training opportunities such as apprenticeships, but now it is asking businesses to invest in a specific list of school equipment that administrator say is vital for a growing tech-ed department.

“This isn’t a wish list. It’s a must-have list,” Weber said.

The items on the list, which have a total cost of $161,600, range from a $2,000 welder to a

$24,600 plasma table.

The district's proposed investment in the tech-ed project is also significant. The cost of hiring an additional teacher is roughly $65,000 a year in salary and benefits. In addition, the biomedical science course will require a one-time investment of an estimated $45,000 in laptop computers and related equipment, as well as more than $11,000 in recurring costs.

There will also be additional salary costs associated with the science teachers who will take on schedule overloads to teach both their regular classes and the biomedical science course.

Administrators admit the costs are not insignificant, but they say they are well worth it.

"I'm convinced that Port Washington High School graduates are going to have the skills and the work ethic that employers are looking for," Weber said.