



Connect Newton

Connect Newton: Connecting Teachers to Community

Connect Newton is a teacher externship program that gives educators in the Newton County School District a week-long opportunity to step into the day-to-day operations of local employers and bring these experiences back to the classroom. Beginning in 2018 as a partnership between the local economic development organization and Newton County Schools, Connect Newton seeks to build bridges between the business community and those educating the area's future workforce. As Serra Hall, Executive Director of the Newton County Industrial Development Authority, puts it, "it made sense to really look at our educators and ask 'what do you know about our community?'"

Getting Started

In order to get started, leaders of the Connect Newton initiative built ties between local employers, economic development organizations, and schools; utilizing the expertise from individual in all three ensures that teachers will gain experience in the industries and firms that tie into the economic development strategy of the area. For example, Connect Newton places great emphasis on putting teachers into manufacturing facilities to gain first-hand experience as manufacturing has been a large focus area locally with a number of existing employers and new announcements in recent years.

Advanced Preparation

Each spring, schools recruit interested teachers and counselors from elementary, middle, and high school through an open application process. Once a cohort of teachers has been identified, the development authority works with the schools, local employers and Georgia Piedmont Technical College to design a meaningful five days of content, tours, and activities.

Another key piece of preparation is funding the program. While teacher externships tend to be pretty cost-effective programs, one expense that has made a big difference in Connect Newton's efforts is stipends for participating teachers. Providing teachers with funds to offset their lost summer time is a big incentive for teachers to participate. For Newton County, funding for this comes from the school system. In other communities where this has been replicated, funding has come from other sources, such as grants from the regional commission or a local economic development organization funding.

Program Execution

The employers and educators come together for one week each summer. Once groups have been assigned, educators spend the week learning about economic development locally, career opportunities with their assigned employer, skills needed for certain roles, training opportunities with the local technical college, and more. By Friday, educator teams are ready to share their findings with the larger group through a portfolio. This is an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other's experience and share with the other business representatives.

Some best practices used throughout the Connect Newton program include:

- Including teachers and counselors from across K-12 allows students at different age levels to hear about opportunities that are or will be available to them.
- Giving participants the opportunity to shadow employees from different roles in the business
- Allowing participating teachers and employees to learn from each other
- Encouraging teachers to build a portfolio and presentation that can be shared with various stakeholders, including students, in the future.

It is important to remember that the teachers in your community are stakeholders in your local economy as well; not only do they live and work locally, but they help mold the next generations of employees and citizens. A successful teacher externship should make your business's case about local opportunities for jobs and careers regardless if a student is interested in pursuing work right after high school or coming back after post-secondary education.

Keys to success:

- Reach out to local economic development offices and schools about ways to get educators into your business
- Develop opportunities for teachers to see the full breadth of employment opportunities available at your firm
- Refine the experience over time and give opportunities to show off what teachers will bring back