



Effort shapes learners, leaders

Initiative helps disadvantaged students further their education on the concept that learning creates leadership and strengthens businesses and communities.

By **ROD SMITH**

IN Sioux Falls, S.D., 33 graduating high school seniors last spring were also 20 credits — or half way — through the first year of their two-year associate degree at the Southeast Technical Institute (STI) because of their participation in “Learners to Leaders.”

Across the country in Lumberton, N.C., a number of ninth- through 12th-grade students, many of them potential first-generation college students, will begin receiving special educational development experiences this fall at a Lumberton-area high school because of their participation in Learners to Leaders.

In Green Bay, Wis., middle and high school students are attending educational workshops and leadership conferences and making trips designed to explore careers through their participation in Learners to Leaders.

Elsewhere, from Denison, Iowa, to Hampton Roads, Va., students who may not even graduate from high school are receiving the assistance and resources they need to not only complete high

school but to go on to college through their participation in Learners to Leaders.

Learners to Leaders is an initiative of Smithfield Foods Inc. and business and education alliances in communities in which Smithfield operates to strengthen those communities by providing their young people with opportunities to learn and then to lead, according to a description of the initiative that funds the various alliances through grants from the company’s philanthropic arm, the Smithfield-Luter Foundation.

The initiative targets young people facing academic, economic or social challenges who might often become the first members of their families to attend post-high school institutions, according to the description.

Announced at the end of 2006, the company noted that the initiative already has eight partnerships in place and will be expanded to additional communities across the U.S. and in Europe. Learners to Leaders

“demonstrates our passion for nourishing children’s minds and bodies,” said C. Larry Pope, chief executive officer and president of Smithfield, the largest pork and turkey producer and fifth-largest beef producer in the U.S.

Smithfield believes firmly that education is critical “in strengthening communities and shaping tomorrow’s leaders,” added Dennis Treacy, company vice president for corporate and environmental affairs.

He said students in the many programs receive not only educational opportunities but practical business

experiences, often in the form of internships, and local businesses have access

to fresh talent pools. “So, everybody wins,” he said.

In the Sioux Falls program, the graduating seniors of the class of 2007-08 received financial and other resources to attend STI and work on their associate degrees while they were completing their high school degrees.

Sioux Falls school superintendent Dr. Pamela Homan described the students as “non-traditional learners” who said their experience “expanded their horizons for post-secondary education and potential career opportunities.”

Members of the 2008-09 class have been selected for the program’s second year.

In the Lumberton program, students receive laptop computers to complete assignments, work with mentors such as local businesspeople and attend quarterly leadership seminars covering topics from business and industry to government service and providing skills in studying, public speaking and time management.

Students who complete the programs and enroll at the local community college will receive scholarships and additional funds for books and expenses.

One of the most unusual programs is in St. Joseph, Mo., where a 70-year-old man — a sharecropper’s son who never went to school — attended first grade last year and began learning to read and write with assistance from the initiative.

“He is inspiring all of us to seize new opportunities and setting a great example for his classmates” of the importance of education, Pope noted.



Kids need to rock with farms, nature

CHILDREN today are becoming increasingly disconnected from agriculture and nature, and schools and teachers need to address this so children learn to appreciate farming/food production and nature, according to Rolling Stones keyboardist and rocker Chuck Leavell.

He shared this message in remarks to more than 500 teachers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s “Ag in the Classroom” conference last month, referring to what he called the “nature-deficit disorder” in which younger generations don’t understand or value

agriculture and nature.

He said classrooms “are ideal places” to address this and suggested that teachers embrace Ag in the Classroom and the American Forest Foundation’s “Project Learning Tree” that provide resources to help students gain a greater awareness of the roles of agriculture and nature in the economy and society.

Leavell said he was speaking not as an entertainer but as a Georgia tree farmer. His book, *The Tree Farmer*, published last year, received the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture’s “Book of the Year” award.



AG AND NATURE: Today’s children are experiencing “nature-deficit disorder,” growing up with little understanding about agriculture and nature, according to Chuck Leavell, a keyboardist for the Rolling Stones and a tree farmer in Georgia. He called on teachers to embrace resources to teach the importance of agriculture and nature.

Here’s the point

AGRICULTURE gives back. It gives back in the form of responsible stewardship of animals and land and in responsible social initiatives.

The latter is demonstrated in the “Learners to Leaders” initiative of Smithfield Foods Inc. The initiative recognizes that helping kids who are at risk of failing to complete high school not only graduate from high school but go on to college creates leaders and strengthens communities.

Accordingly, Smithfield is providing money and other resources through its Smithfield-Luter Foundation and partnerships with businesses and schools to help students learn and lead. The partnerships are being formed across the U.S. in the communities in which the company has operations, and the success stories are coming forward.

In another learning initiative, teachers are being encouraged to embrace agriculture and nature programs that offer teaching tools to help kids gain an understanding about the value of agriculture, food production and nature.

These are important messages that are available at www.learnerstoleaders.com and at www.FeedstuffsFoodLink.com, as well as at the *Feedstuffs FoodLink* YouTube site at www.youtube.com/user.smuirhead.

Feedstuffs FoodLink partner companies are committed to the production of a safe, abundant, high-quality and affordable food supply. Their support allows us to communicate to consumers and influencers in the food chain the facts of modern agriculture and food production. We do this through our online education repository at FeedstuffsFoodLink.com, community and industry interaction, Dish Network programming and weekly e-newsletters, blogs and this Feedstuffs page.



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