

Growing Education and Business

Partnership between district and technical college bring opportunities to students, revitalizes economy

SESSION *Community Incubator 101* **Presenters** Florence School District: Ben Niehaus, superintendent; Linda Opsahl, board member; Ron Yadro, board member; NWTC: Sally Miller, north region manager

Just five years after a major renovation, Hillcrest School in Florence County stood dark and vacant. Today it's bustling with activity and life as the Woodland Kitchen and Regional Learning Center.

"This is a perfect example of how one small idea can metamorphosize into so much more," said Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the School District of Florence County.

Florence is a small, rural school district located in one of the least populated counties in Wisconsin. In 1999, the district remodeled Hillcrest and added a new library, gym and computer lab. Financial difficulties led to the building's closure in 2004.

The district tried to sell the building without success. Then in 2008, the district was approached by representatives of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) who were looking for a place to put a business incubator to help support local entrepreneurs. They were attracted to Hillcrest because of the new kitchen that had been added during the renovation. They ended up renting the kitchen and other space in the school for \$36,000 a year plus a portion of the utility bills.

NWTC invested \$80,000 to bring the kitchen up to commercial codes

and then leased spaces to a variety of small local businesses, including a mustard manufacturer, bakers and others who needed a kitchen. In addition to the kitchen and equipment, NWTC staff provided advice to the budding business owners.

The original focus began to change as more and more activities were added at the site. NWTC began offering adult classes in cooking, quilting and other subjects. The college also started summer tech camps for middle school students.

For high school students, there is the Woodland Regional Technical Academy, a partnership between NWTC, Florence County and three other area school districts where students take classes that prepare them to earn certificates in career fields including nursing assistant, electro-mechanical and health care customer service. They can also take classes in general studies.

Because all of the school districts are small, this partnership allows the districts to offer their students opportunities they could not do otherwise, Niehaus said.

And the former school continues to evolve. A natural foods store has opened as well as the Woodland Community Cafe, which serves meals to seniors. It is also the site of bridal



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showers and other large community gatherings. The annual harvest festival is held there. There is also a family center, a walk-fit program, and a children's summer program sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Extension.

Because of the varied uses, about 2,000 people or almost one-half of Florence county's population are in and out of the building during a year.

There are more plans in the works. The cafe may expand into a coffee shop. A roller derby group would like to use the gym. And the business incubator may expand again.

"It does a lot of things to not just sustain but grow the area," Niehaus said. "The facility has purpose now. It has value." ■