

Program to let OV students explore postsecondary opportunities

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BRANDON — A new program will help Otter Valley Union Middle School students explore opportunities after high school.

Otter Valley Union Middle and High School was one of 20 schools in Vermont and northeastern New York selected for a pilot program created by college- and career-readiness nonprofit CFES Brilliant Pathways.

Based in Essex, New York, CFES (College for Every Student) Brilliant Pathways has worked with schools from Dublin to Honolulu to help more than 100,000 children go to college, according to Rick Dalton, president and CEO.

The new North Country Brilliant Pathways program, which aims to “provide schools with a multi-faceted, comprehensive college readiness program that will put more of their students on a path to college,” is a distillation of the organization’s work during the past 30 years — work Dalton outlines in a recently published book titled “Rural America’s Pathways to College and Career.”

As Dalton puts it, “rural America is slipping.”

According to the National Center for Education statistics, even though rural students attend college at rates comparable to urban students (59% vs. 61%), retention rates tell a different story.

NCES reports that only 29% of rural Americans aged 18-24 are enrolled in colleges and universities compared to 42% of all Americans of the same age.

Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the problem. A news release provided by Brilliant Pathways reported that FAFSA federal student aid application completions — an indicator of a student’s intent to attend college — dropped 10% nationally this year and 15% in rural areas.

Dalton clarified that the program focuses broadly on potential pathways after high school, including attending college or pursuing various credentials of value, like educational certificates, occupational licenses and industry-recognized certifications.

“We think every kid should be thinking about ... post-secondary education,” he said.

But for Dalton, it's not just about getting kids to college; it's also about finding them well-paying jobs in rural areas.

"The natural resource for jobs is an educated, skilled workforce. And you don't see it in rural America. What you see, on the other hand is, your kids who go off to college are leaving — so many of them — and not coming back," Dalton said.

He explained that the types of jobs college graduates need to pay off student loans are not easy to find in small towns, leading to a rural "brain drain."

One of the goals of program for Dalton, then, is closing that gap and "restoring economic vitality to small towns" in Vermont and northeastern New York in order to eventually reach a critical mass and "establish that foothold of jobs."

To achieve these goals, Brilliant Pathways has committed \$1.5 million to fund the new program, which will launch in 20 schools, including Otter Valley, this fall.

Dalton said implementation of the program will vary from school to school.

"It's really got to fit the culture and the structure of an individual school."

At OV, Principal James Avery said all seventh- and eighth-graders will participate in the program. There are also plans to eventually extend it to ninth-graders.

Avery said it's useful to get students thinking about career opportunities at an earlier age.

"This will, hopefully, open their eyes up and get them to think more about what directions they may want to go," he said.

Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins said the program helps meet a need voiced by OV families in a recent survey, which showed a desire for more support around career and college readiness.

"This really expands those services, particularly at the younger age," she said.

OV will be provided with a professional program director, who will make in-person and virtual visits throughout the year to guide the development of college and career plans.

The school will also have access to a resource library and a variety of partnerships and networking opportunities with more than 800 colleges, universities, businesses and corporations.

As part of the program, educators, students and families will be able to participate in professional development and enrichment opportunities, including monthly college- and career-readiness adviser trainings and exposure to STEM postsecondary and career opportunities.

OV will also be partnered with an urban school to “promote cultural exchange and connection and prepare students to navigate a diverse world.”

The partnership can include field trips to partner school communities or taking virtual classes together.

“I think it’s a real need in the North Country (and Vermont) because there isn’t the racial diversity that you see in other places,” said Dalton.

Along the way, Dalton said students will learn “essential” or soft skills, like perseverance, teamwork, networking, goal setting and leadership.

Based on interest so far — more than 70 schools in the region applied to the program — Dalton said he hopes to raise enough funding to launch another phase soon, adding that he can envision the program serving as a national model for rural schools.

Meredith McCartney, who is currently a guidance counselor at OV and the incoming guidance director for next school year, said Brilliant Pathways is a good complement to existing postsecondary readiness programs, like those offered through the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation.

“The thing that really sold me on the program was when they started talking about the connections that they could make for students with industries and corporations,” she said.

She explained that students will be able to participate in virtual panels with aviation mechanics at Southwest Airlines or scientists at NASA. Those opportunities, she said, will expose students to career paths they might not otherwise consider.

“For a rural community, it’s expanding the thinking, expanding the possibility and the dreaming,” said McCartney. “If you’re in a rural community, sometimes it’s hard to imagine that you could get a job repairing planes or ... be a pilot flying for a major airline.”