

Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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Woodstock business leaders bring real world to INCubatoredu classroom

The premise behind INCubatoredu classes is putting students into real life business scenarios, and one way to accomplish that is by having real world business leaders in front of the classroom.

Woodstock High School INCubatoredu students this year are fortunate to have Garrett Anderson, economic development director for the City of Woodstock, and Jackie Speciale, Senior Manager of Finance, Purchasing and Human Resources at Mac Automation Concepts, Inc. leading their class each day along with business teacher Dawn Thompson.

Both Anderson and Speciale have been involved with the INCubatoredu classes as mentors and coaches since it began in 2016, but this school year they made a bigger time investment working with students each school day.

One of their key contributions is their business community connections. Anderson and Speciale bring in leaders with expertise in specific business areas who are able to share their experience with students.

“Really the best way to teach it is to have guest instructors coming into the classroom who provide a wealth of knowledge and their community background into the process,” Anderson said.

While that emphasis had always been important to the INCubatoredu program, the networking suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic for many reasons.

Guest speakers teach to students about market size, marketing strategies and many other business topics that directly relate to the projects students work on throughout the school year.

Speciale, who spends a lot of time developing students’ leadership and teamwork skills, said she notices a difference in students’ reaction to the practical lessons provided through guest speakers.

“I see them engaged a lot more. I feel like it’s a benefit, and I’ve seen it from previous years,” Speciale said.

Students in INCubator classes work on teams to design a real product and come up with strategies to make that product viable for distribution and sales throughout the year. Eventually, the teams make their pitch to a board in a style similar to “Shark Tank.” The board selects winners whom they believe have the best products and strategies.

“One of the main connections we have is that we’re both members of the Woodstock Rotary Club, so we’re really leaning heavily on the Rotary group as a group of good, volunteer-minded professionals,” Anderson said.

Anderson and Speciale said guest speakers bring a lot of energy to class and a side benefit is that they help students begin to form their own local business networks.

“We’ve had a lot of our class participants use that network to get jobs locally within the industries and businesses that they were first introduced to through our classes and mentors,” Anderson said.

Some of those former students have even returned to the program as mentors for current students.