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PARKVIEW HEALTH

Health Care

Today's students hold the key to tomorrow's health care

In this installment of our Thought Leadership series, Heather Schoegler, director of workforce planning at Parkview Health, discusses the importance of introducing students to health care careers as early as middle school to create a sustainable talent pipeline and strong workforce.

Across the country, health systems are grappling with shortages of nurses, physicians and other essential caregivers. The challenge is particularly acute in communities where access to care depends on attracting and retaining talent locally. While these workforce pressures are often discussed in terms of today's vacancies, I believe we have to think much further ahead.

The decisions we make today about workforce development will determine who cares for our communities a decade from now.

That reality has fundamentally changed how we approach workforce planning at Parkview Health. Rather than focusing solely on recruitment, we are investing in long-term strategies that help young people discover health care careers before they make decisions about college, work and where they want to build their lives.

Talent pipelines are built over years, not months. The strongest workforce strategies begin long before a position is posted by helping students connect their interests and strengths to meaningful career opportunities.

For many young people, health care careers can feel distant or difficult to imagine. They may know a nurse or visit a physician's office, but they rarely see the full range of careers that support patient care. Many don't realize that someone from their own community can become a clinician, therapist, technologist or health care leader.

When students have opportunities to engage with health care professionals and experience health care environments firsthand, those possibilities become real.

At Parkview, that work starts early. Every Fort Wayne Community Schools sixth grader has the opportunity to participate in interactive health care experiences led by Parkview clinicians and co-workers. As Indiana's largest school district, Fort Wayne Community Schools provides a unique opportunity to reach thousands of students during a formative stage in their education. Students practice stitching on synthetic skin models, explore diagnostic technology and use virtual reality tools to experience health care from a provider's perspective. For many, it is the first time they can envision themselves pursuing a health care career.

That exposure continues into high school through our partnership with Junior Achievement's 3DE program. Parkview leaders bring real-world business and health care challenges into the classroom, giving students the opportunity to analyze problems and develop solutions alongside industry professionals. The program's first graduating class in Fort Wayne saw a seven-percentage-point increase in graduation rates.

The pathway doesn't end there. Through partnerships with colleges and universities across northeast Indiana, Parkview nurses serve as instructors and mentors, helping expand training opportunities for future caregivers. In high-demand fields such as surgical technology, we're also partnering with educational institutions to create pathways that combine classroom learning, hands-on experience and employment opportunities. Together, these efforts help students move from career exploration to career preparation and, ultimately, employment.

Health care organizations have a responsibility to be part of that journey. Partnerships among schools, colleges, employers and community organizations are essential to building the workforce our communities will depend on in the years ahead.

The benefits extend beyond health care. Schools see stronger outcomes. Employers build sustainable talent pipelines. Communities benefit more when young people can pursue meaningful careers close to home.

The health of our state depends on having skilled professionals ready to care for future generations. Yet demand for health care continues to grow as our population ages, while declining birth rates are shrinking the traditional pipeline of young adults entering the workforce.

At its core, workforce development is about access. Every student who discovers a health care career, every learner who gains the training they need and every professional who chooses to stay and serve our communities helps strengthen access to care for future generations. It is also a matter of accountability. Health care organizations have a responsibility to invest in solutions today that will ensure patients can receive the care they need tomorrow.

Despite those challenges, I remain optimistic.

I see students asking thoughtful questions about health care careers. I see educators creating opportunities for experiential learning. Most importantly, I see young people who are eager to learn, contribute and make a difference.

Workforce planning is often viewed through the lens of projections, labor trends and hiring needs. Those factors matter, but this work is about helping someone discover a passion and ensuring that when a neighbor needs care years from now, a skilled and compassionate professional is there to provide it.

The future health care workforce is already here. Our job is to help it thrive.

We committed to showing our proof.

PARKVIEW HEALTH

We've made commitments to lower the cost of care and make it easier to access. For every commitment, we invite you to see our work.

Because you should judge us by our actions, not just by our words.

See the proof at
parkview.com/proof