

# IN THE NEWS

## STUDENTS TAKE PART IN SUMMER ICHALLENGEU CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM TO ENHANCE BUSINESS SKILLS

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Katy Cumberland never really knew what it would be like to meet a business executive. She had her ideas from movies and TV shows like "Celebrity Apprentice," but those depictions, she said, always seemed a little far-fetched.

"Usually when you think of CEOs, you think of suits and ties and big fancy offices," the West Ottawa High School junior said. But when she met Noel Cuellar, CEO of Zeeland Township's Primera Plastics, her opinion changed. "He was a down-to-earth guy wearing jeans and a button-down shirt."

Cumberland and several other students from schools within the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District recently sat down to talk with Cuellar about his beginnings as owner of the plastic injection products business.

Cuellar, with his wife Janet, started the business in 1994 with just two machines and two employees. It's now an award-winning business with 130 employees and 30 injection molding machines.

As part of the OAISD's summer IChallengeU career development program, the students were tasked with finding out what makes area businesses like Primera Plastics successful. Other student teams taking part in IChallengeU fanned out across the community to solve different problems and challenges for other area businesses and nonprofits.

The idea of the two-week program, West Ottawa High School teacher Bre Bartels said, is to create an intensive learning experience in which students solve real-world issues and gain experience working in a team environment. The students also acquire four credits from Grand Rapids Community College in the business innovations course.

In addition to conducting interviews with company executives like Cuellar, the students also spoke with entry-level employees and visited neighboring companies Gentex and Royal Technologies to gather information and find out how area businesses define success.

What the group has found so far, Cumberland said, is that in order for a mid-size company to be successful, every employee needs to feel appreciated and valued by the leadership team.

"Happy employees are No. 1," Hamilton High School senior Kenneth Klett said. "You have to always listen to the little guy. Definitely listen to what they have to say."



Cumberland, said she has been impressed by the strong company culture that Cuellar has fostered at Primera.

"It's been amazing to see how much they care about their entry-level employees," she said. "I've learned a lot about collaboration and figuring things out and I've gained insight into the manufacturing business."

The students will spend the next few days pooling their research to develop their presentation strategy for the IChallengeU regional competition on July 18. The winning group will be named by a panel of judges made up of business, civic and education leaders on Friday, July 19

Emily Cook, Lexi Carter, Kenneth Klett and Jake Newhouse review videos on a tablet Wednesday, July 10, 2013 at Primera Plastics. The students are spending two weeks taking part in the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District's IChallengeU program.  
Photo courtesy of Holland Sentinel

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