



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/first-friday-ceo-dickinson-county>

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Not a typical high school class: Program trains young entrepreneurs

CEO Dickinson County officials explain innovative approach

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

ABILENE, Kan. – The lead facilitator of a program that pairs high school juniors and seniors with businesses in Dickinson County says the students are gaining experience “that goes beyond the classroom.”

“We’re helping these students build meaningful connections with business leaders across the community,” said Brandy Gray, facilitator with [CEO Dickinson County](#).

CEO is an abbreviation for Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities and is one of 74 such programs in the United States – though the only one in Kansas. Since its inception in 2020, Gray said CEO Dickinson County has graduated 34 students from five area high schools, and attracted 37 business investors.

There are 13 students in the current class, which meets 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. Monday through Friday. Students receive high school credit.

“It’s a really immersive, hands on experience where students develop the skills, mindset and confidence that they need to succeed in business and beyond,” Gray said.

Gray led her group’s presentation during the March 7 [First Friday e-Call](#), a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas. The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

Troy Leith, who works for the Dickinson County Economic Development Corporation and is a board member for CEO Dickinson County, said one of the benefits of the program is that youth develop an appreciation for being in the local workforce.

“Part of my role in Dickinson County is working to develop the workforce, so I spend as much time in the high schools as I can,” Leith said. “As a community, one of the unmentioned side benefits of programs like this is that we have students in high schools who are thinking on a

different level than most students. And whether they know it or not, they are having a great effect on their peers.”

Leith adds: “As a community, we want these students to stay here. Of course, we also want them to be able to go out, do something fantastic (elsewhere), but then bring some of the most awesome stuff back to our community.”

Gray said CEO Dickinson County students never meet in a traditional classroom; most of the time, they are in meeting rooms at local businesses or similar locations. The curriculum includes team building, mentoring, business visits, a student-led trade show and more.

Sydney Friedli, a member of the 2022 class of CEO Dickinson County, is now a student at K-State Salina, studying to become a commercial airlines pilot.

“CEO taught me all the life lessons that high school wasn’t able to teach me,” Friedli said. “CEO taught me how to successfully network with individuals who might have been intimidating to me before. It was worth every single mile driven, every 6 a.m. alarm clock, every interaction I had.”

More information on the program, including opportunities to get involved as students or investors, or even explore a similar program in other Kansas counties, is available online at <https://www.dickinsoncountyceo.com>.

The full talk and other First Friday presentations are [available online](#) from K-State Research and Extension.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATION: Links used in this story

First Friday e-calls, <https://ksre-learn.com/entrepreneurship>

CEO Dickinson County, <https://www.dickinsoncountyceo.com>

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