



Bluff Country Collaborative

# 2023-24 ANNUAL REPORT



110 East Grove St.  
Caledonia, MN 55921  
[www.bluffcountrycollaborative.org](http://www.bluffcountrycollaborative.org)

*Sustainable  
Regional Partnerships.  
Local Impact!*

# A Message From BCC Leadership

The Bluff Country Collaborative (BCC) experienced continued growth, engagement, and improvement in the 2023-24 academic year. Building on the momentum from 2022-23, with funding and support from nearly 200 area businesses, our Youth Workforce Navigator organized career exploration and skills development opportunities for more than 1,600 area junior high and high school students.

We invite you to explore our annual report and witness firsthand the positive impact of the BCC and the collaborative work we do.

## Some 2023-24 Bluff Country Collaborative highlights include:

- **Presenting at the Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards (MAWB)** annual meeting in Duluth, MN, as part of a panel discussion around successful Workforce Development and Education partnership initiatives throughout the MN.
- **Selection as one of fewer than 80 second-round finalists in the national Career Z Challenge competition**, a cohort-based cooperative challenge, to apply for funding to expand work-based learning opportunities in school districts nationwide.
- **Interest and inquiry from several area School Districts in joining the BCC** to help maximize the CTE and career-connected learning opportunities for their students and communities.
- **Career and Technical Education (CTE) Exploration event held outdoors during the Fall Semester** where regional employers bring equipment, facilitate fun activities, and allow students to explore, engage, and experience CTE Careers in our communities.
- **Increased interest and attendance for Building and Construction Trades Panel Discussion** (Spring Semester), where students not planning to attend college can meet, learn about, and ask questions of local trade and Union Representatives.
- **Career Fair and Hiring Event for employers, students, and current job seekers** held during the spring semester, where employers can meet and engage with our future workforce and line up interviews.
- **Employer/Business Tours** that allow students to tour local business to see and experience firsthand the everyday internal operations of that industry.
- **Mock Interviews for juniors and seniors**, hosted by area industry and business professionals.
- **In-Class Speakers** that connected industry professionals in various career fields with students.

The Bluff Country Collaborative Leadership Team would like to express its sincere appreciation to BCC schools, businesses, partners, industry professionals, and students who helped make 2023-24 a success. We are excited to continue facilitating and developing career pathways, experiential learning, and employer engagement opportunities in the 2024-25 academic year for Fillmore and Houston Counties, and Southeast MN.

Gratefully,





# Our Mission

*The mission of BCC amplifies local and regional experiential learning efforts, ensuring that all students in Southeastern Minnesota receive a combination of education and experience in grades 7-12 needed to pursue a meaningful career and/or education pathway after high school graduation.*

## Sustainable & Collaborative Impact

*“Mock interviews help me as much as, if not more than, the students. They allow me the chance try out different questions and figure out what today’s youth are into, and how to connect with them in different ways; what resonates with them.”*

**- Klayton Miner, CEO, Miners Underground**

*“We actually hired the student that I (mock) interviewed last year for an internship and he’s coming back again this year. Thanks!”*

**- Derek Olinger, Bolton & Menk, Inc.**



*“Since 1958, we’ve built our business on family, hard work, and high standards, with the support of our community. BCC is important to us because it gives us the opportunity to give back to our community while connecting us with passionate, local youth that will continue to carry on our legacy and to make a great impact on the future of our industry.”*

**- Megan Sobieski, Caledonia Haulers, Inc.**

*“It is an idea I have been incubating since before the pandemic. With the engine power of MaryAnne Smith, the Youth Workforce Navigator for the Bluff Country Collaborative and six willing area professionals including CPS alumni and parents of current students, this year my idea came to life.”*

**- David Riley, English Teacher at Caledonia Area High School on collaborating with the BCC to host a Workplace Writing and Communication Workshop during regular morning class time.**



*“Houston Public Schools values its partnership with Bluff Country Collaborative because it offers opportunities to our students that they wouldn’t otherwise have. The BCC coordinates and combines resources and career and technical educational opportunities to help us prepare all students in the BCC region for their future.”*

**- Michael Mangan, Houston Public Schools**

# In 2023-24 BCC Students:

## Explored Multiple Career Opportunities



Bluff Country Collaborative

	Number of Participant:		
	Students	Employers	Schools
CTE Exploration Day	556	32	5
Dream Job Event	358	37	5
Industry Tours	166	13	5
<b>Total Careers Explored</b>	<b>1080</b>	<b>82</b>	

## Engaged and Learned from Industry Professionals



Bluff Country Collaborative

	Number of Participant:		
	Students	Employers	Schools
Careers on Campus (8th Grade)	252	15	6
Trade Panel/Assemblies	68	5	3
Classroom Speakers	22	1	1
<b>Total Student Engagement</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>21</b>	

\* Houston Public Schools

## Experienced Careers with Regional Businesses



Bluff Country Collaborative

	Number of Participant:		
	Students	Employers	Schools
Career Fair / Hiring Event	72	25	5
Job Shadows	28	24	1
Mock Interviews	145	54	4
<b>Total Career Experiences</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>103</b>	

*Although the BCC may not directly coordinate Job Shadows and Work Experiences, it plays a vital role in leveraging its network of business and professional resources to connect area schools with local employers.*



# About Bluff Country Collaborative

In the summer of 2017, local economic development staff began speaking with businesses about the dire need for employees. These conversations revealed that regional employers wanted to engage with local students to build workforce pipelines but needed more connections to the schools and additional capacity to manage programs. Simultaneously, the SE Perkins Consortium was facilitating conversations with area school districts to discuss experiential learning opportunities. These school districts were eager to provide experiential learning opportunities for their students. Still, more community and business partner engagement was needed to offer opportunities and programming on a larger scale.

When economic development and education leaders met and realized they were working on the same issue, albeit from different perspectives, it was immediately apparent that an opportunity existed to create a "bridge" between schools and businesses. This new partnership ultimately formed the Bluff Country Collaborative, an innovative effort to connect business, education, and local government, and organizations committed to the region's economic sustainability.

Since 2017, the BCC has continued to expand in both membership and scope, enabling thousands of students in Fillmore County, Houston County, and the surrounding area to actively target and explore numerous career pathways and employment opportunities with local and regional employers, beginning as early as 7th grade.

## 2023-24 BCC Leadership Partners

### **Allison Wagner (CEDA)**

Director, Houston County, MN  
Economic Development Authority

### **Brian Cashman**

Secondary Coordinator  
Southeast Perkins Consortium

### **Chris Hahn (CEDA)**

Director, Fillmore County, MN  
Economic Development Authority

### **Dawn Lubahn**

Director of Secondary Relations  
Minnesota State College Southeast

### **Megan Horton**

Regional Youth Programs Coordinator  
Workforce Development, Inc.

### **MaryAnne Smith**

Youth Workforce Navigator  
Bluff Country Collaborative

### **Mike Schnell**

Career Connected Learning Specialist  
Southeast Service Cooperative

### **Sarah Ness**

Program Manager  
Southeast Service Cooperative

*"Ensuring the economic vitality of rural communities in Houston and Fillmore Counties by connecting schools, employers, local government, and community resources in an effort to provide meaningful, hands-on experience to the next generation of workers."*

# The Youth Workforce Navigator Role

The role of Youth Workforce Navigator provides a vital connection between area schools and local employers. Through a visible presence within each of the partner school districts, the Youth Workforce Navigator's primary focus is working with teachers and administrators to help identify and coordinate experiential learning opportunities for area students relevant to community workforce needs.

Since 2020, MaryAnne Smith, has served as the BCC Youth Workforce Navigator. An ag and math educator by profession, MaryAnne is also a certified Teacher Coordinator of Work Based Learning, making her uniquely qualified for this work. She understands first-hand the needs and challenges area students, teachers and administrators encounter related to career exploration, career pathway development, and engagement opportunities.

As the Youth Workforce Navigator, MaryAnne spends approximately 30 percent of her time at partner schools developing close working relationships with teachers and administrators, listening to their needs, and connecting them with area businesses. This physical presence also allows MaryAnne to quickly identify opportunities to collaborate with other schools with similar needs, maximizing participation for events like CTE Exploration Day, Trade and Industry Panel Discussions or Industry Tours.

As a result of her excellent work as the BCC Youth Workforce Navigator, MaryAnne Smith was named a **2022 Rising Star under 40** by the 7 Rivers Alliance, Tri-state Leadership Council.

## BCC Partner School Districts



Caledonia, MN



Houston, MN



La Crescent - Hokah



Lewiston-Altura



Mabel-Canton



Rushford- Peterson



Spring Grove, MN



# 2023-24 Funding Sources

## Platinum Partners



## Gold Partners



Arlin Falck  
Foundation



## Silver Partners

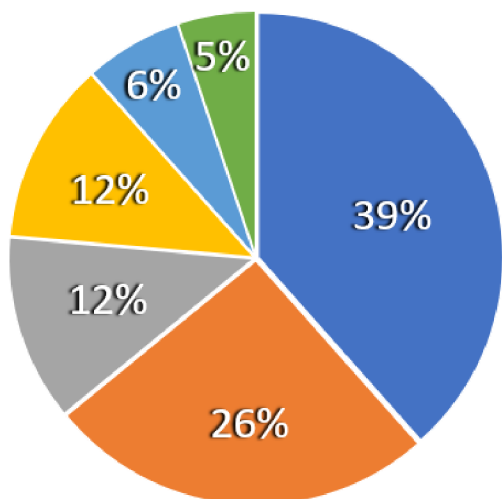


## Bronze Partners

AMS Micromedical  
Caledonia Veterinary Clinic

Sno Pack Foods  
Mark & Elizabeth Dokken

# 2023-24 Funding Sources



- Youth Skills Training Grant
- Southeast Service Cooperative
- Community & Foundation Grants
- Perkins Grant Funding
- Regional Business Partners
- Partner School Districts

For more information on the Bluff Country Collaborative, Career Engagement Events in your area, or how your business or organization can become involved in preparing Southeastern Minnesota's future workforce, please visit our website at [www.BluffCountryCollaborative.org](http://www.BluffCountryCollaborative.org), or contact MaryAnne Smith, BCC Youth Workforce Navigator at [bccnavigators@gmail.com](mailto:bccnavigators@gmail.com) or 507-251-4388.