

# GRAND FORKS' CAREER IMPACT ACADEMY IS DESIGNED FOR SUCCESS

**THE EDUCATION CENTER REFLECTS THE CAREER INTERESTS OF BOTH STUDENTS AND THE REGIONAL WORKFORCE NEEDS**

BY KATIE BECKER

On Aug. 28, the Grand Forks Career Impact Academy opened the doors to a wealth of opportunity, designed for those seeking meaningful careers in their own backyard. Collaboratively developed by Grand Forks Public Schools, the State of North Dakota, students, local partners, JLG Architects, and BNDRY Studio, the Academy is a workforce game-changer. From healthcare to heavy equipment, opportunities for hands-on education are putting students in the driver's seat, ready to navigate a rapidly evolving future.

## BY COMMUNITY, FOR COMMUNITY

In 2022, the North Dakota Career and Technical Education Board approved millions in grant funding for statewide CTE projects that align workforce needs with student interests. Within a span of 72 days, more than \$11 million was raised from private donations to qualify for a \$10 million state match that supported the vision of GFPS.

At the project's outset, students were asked to share their vision. They overwhelmingly wanted a non-traditional, immersive environment that supports their interests and creates exploratory opportunities. This vision laid the groundwork to transform how the region lives, learns, and does business.

"The Career Impact Academy is a dedicated Career and Technical Education (CTE) facility to serve students of both Grand Forks and surrounding rural communities," explained GFPS' Eric Ripley. "With the intentional focus of constructing a building with spaces designed specifically to provide the relevant, engaging, hands-on learning experiences synonymous with high-quality CTE programs, the Career Impact Academy reflects the career interests of both students and the regional workforce needs."

## BUILDING AN INDUSTRY PIPELINE

Programming for the Career Impact Academy was identified through a needs assessment informed by multiple stakeholders to align with post-secondary opportunities and create an industry pipeline.

"The input from our industry partners, along with student feedback, played a critical role in shaping the vision, programming, and physical learning spaces to support technical training and academic growth — spaces where students can explore high-demand fields while developing real-world technical skills," explained Ripley.

When Lunseth Plumbing & Heating Co. was asked to join a steering committee, Phil Kraemer and his team jumped at the invitation. "Our company has been providing hands-on experience and career exploration oppor-



THE NEW GRAND FORKS CAREER IMPACT ACADEMY WAS DEVELOPED COLLABORATIVELY BY GRAND FORKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, THE STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA, STUDENTS, LOCAL PARTNERS, JLG ARCHITECTS, AND BNDRY STUDIO. / COURTESY SHAWN SENESCALL

tunities to students at the local high schools for several years, so we felt this was a perfect opportunity to create a space that would work for the students, instructors, and the guest industry presenters to highlight construction trade careers," explained Kraemer.

GFPS brought on several industry partners and stakeholders, including Altru, to participate in healthcare-focused breakout sessions to offer insight into workforce priorities and space design. "We were able to share in-put on how to make the space as realistic as possible," added Cassie Olson, DNP, RN, Manager of Education & Patient Experience at Altru. "For example, placement of whiteboards in the CNA lab to simulate a hospital room and discussing how space could be used for PT/OT and acute care."

Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corporation President Keith Lund said bringing the Career Impact Academy to life has been the most rewarding process he's experienced during his 19 years at the EDC.

"The way the community rallied around this opportunity is truly inspiring. Everything we did in pursuit of this was absolutely necessary, and we wouldn't be here today if our industry leaders hadn't risen to the challenge," Lund said.

## LEARNING BY DESIGN

The Academy encourages industry and community engagement by creating physical connections that increase visibility between spaces and programs, sparking students' interest early on.

"All career construction trades need a firm foundation in the basics, and this facility can provide that," added Kraemer. "But even more important, it will provide opportunities for students to pursue a dream or even find out what that future dream job is!"

## BEYOND SIMULATION

Thanks to guidance from industry partners, students are gaining meaningful opportunities to explore interests, test abilities, and map a fulfilling career path. The Career Impact Academy is a place where people can change their minds, challenge interests, and steer their lives in a whole new direction ... all in their own backyard. **PB**

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