



ECO DEVO 101

CASE STUDY:

How Workforce Development Strengthens Wyandotte County's Economy

Building Wyandotte County's Classroom-to-Career Pipeline

FAM **USA**

Workforce development is part and parcel of any regional economy. To its credit, Wyandotte County has built a dynamic classroom-to-career pipeline that brings together educators, county officials, and employers around a shared goal.

Wyandotte Economic Development Council (WYEDC) is partnering with four school districts, Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC), and local employers to build a classroom-to-career pipeline that prepares students for family-sustaining careers while helping businesses address their workforce needs.

Through WYEDC's Career Pathway Student Tours, high school career pathways, and the Kansas City chapter of the [Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education \(FAME\)](#), students are introduced to local industries, gain technical skills, earn college credentials, and transition directly into paid employment. At the same time, employers gain access to a reliable source of skilled talent while strengthening Wyandotte County's long-term economic competitiveness.

The following is the story of how that pipeline works, told by those working to build it and those it is working to build. It centers on the people inside the data: a student who almost passed up a career-defining opportunity, and the educators and development professionals who put in the daily effort of connecting students with the resources they need to pursue rewarding technical careers. It is this work, more than any single statistic, that actually builds the pipeline.

Highlights of the Pipeline:

- Career Pathway Student Tours reach all ten high schools across Wyandotte County's four school districts, with more than 17 tours organized this year alone.
- The FAME program at KCKCC combines three days a week on a sponsoring employer's floor with two days in the classroom, producing graduates who finish debt-free with an associate degree and two years of hands-on experience.
- Students participating in the FAME program earn competitive wages while completing their associate degree.
- After completing the program, fully credentialed graduates earn between \$38 and \$42 an hour, or around \$80,000 annually.
- Employers gain access to locally trained talent, reducing recruitment costs and improving retention.

FROM CAREER TOUR TO CAREER

Faustino Palacio

\$24/HR

Starting Wage

5

Semesters to a
Debt-Free Degree

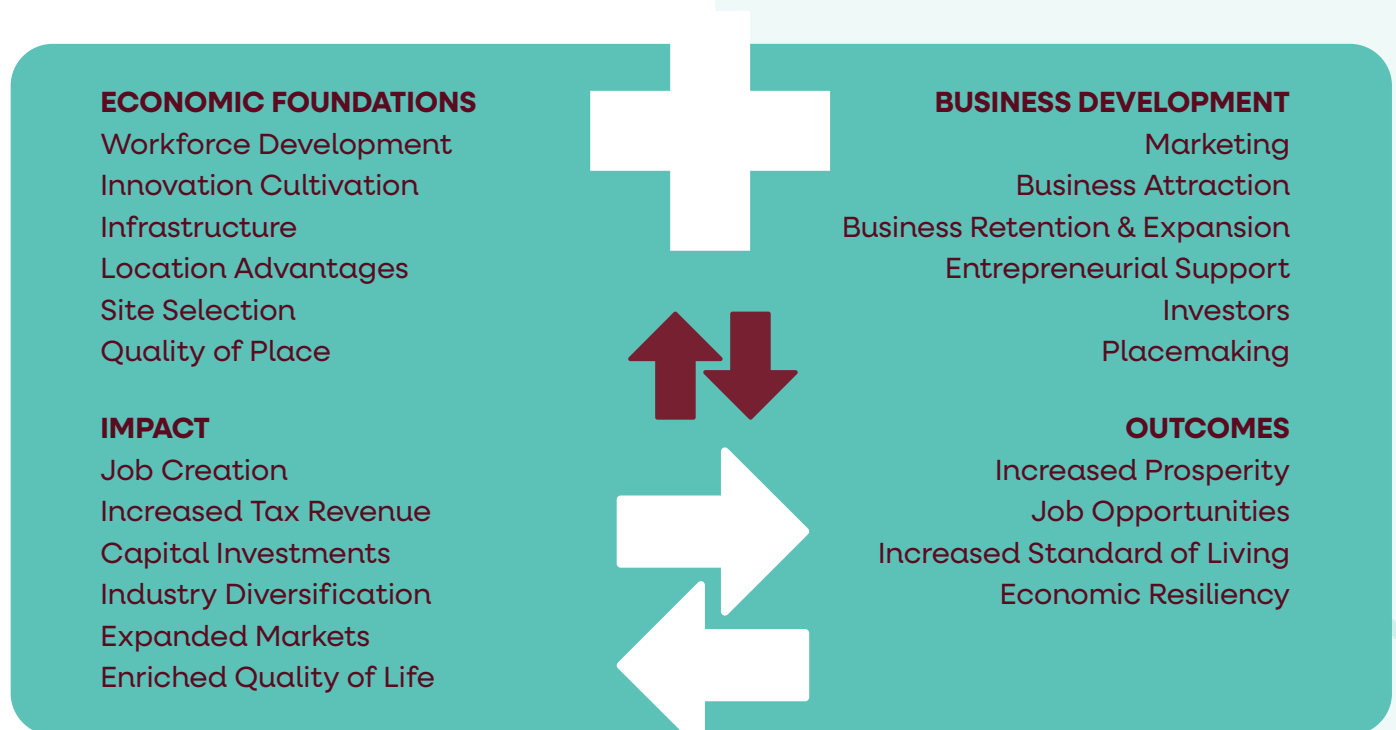
EcoDevo 101: How Economic Development Supports the Growth of Wyandotte County Businesses

Economic development is often discussed in terms of its parts, each category siloed and distinct: business retention and expansion, attraction, workforce development, and job creation, among others. [Wyandotte Economic Development Council](#) (WYEDC) joins other innovative thinkers working to flip the perception towards an ecosystem model where each objective is interlocked and dependent like the pieces of a puzzle, to form the total picture of [EcoDevo 101](#).

Economic Development Ecosystem

Structuring economic development around this ecosystem framework, creates an environment where economic foundations and business development create impact and favorable economic outcomes. Wyandotte Economic Development Council prioritizes:

- Creating Jobs
- Raising Household Income
- Building and Strengthening the Workforce
- Improving Quality of Life
- Generating Tax Revenue





Character of Place is an Important Economic Foundation

In “The character of innovative places: entrepreneurial strategy, economic development, and prosperity” (*Small Bus Econ* 43, 9–20, 2014), Maryann P. Feldman asks, “Why do investments in certain places yield jobs, growth and prosperity while similar investments made in seemingly identical places fail to produce the desired results?”

While acknowledging that geography and clustering of resources play important roles, she postulates, “What matters most is human agency — the building of institutions and the myriad public and private decisions that determine what I call the character of place — a spirit of authenticity, engagement and common purpose.”

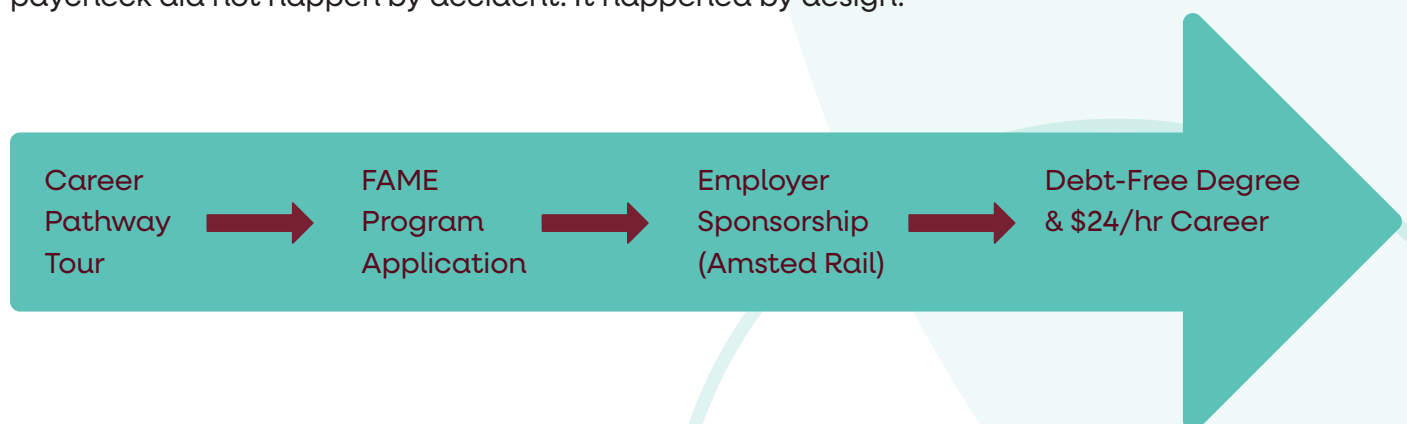
In the Kansas City, KS, (KCK) region, Wyandotte Economic Development Council (WYEDC) supplies the human agency for placemaking, bringing assets, stakeholders, innovators and agencies together to fortify the region’s economic development ecosystem. WYEDC promotes and strengthens Wyandotte County’s economy through innovative approaches to programs, partnerships and incentives, as well as leadership in industrial, residential, office and retail markets. In 2025, WYEDC’s efforts resulted in 24 announced projects, \$824 million in capital investment, and 1,880 new jobs. There has been over \$6.2 billion in capital investments since 2012.

How Wyandotte County's Classroom-to-Career Pipeline is Building Tomorrow's Workforce Today

The Tour That Started Everything

Earlier this year, at a career fair hosted by the Turner USD 202 school district, the Kansas City chapter of the FAME program participated as an exhibitor and included a recent Turner High School graduate, Faustino Palacio, among its representatives. Faustino stood at the table, telling his old classmates about the program he had enrolled in, the money he was making, and the debt-free degree he was working toward. He is currently working as a maintenance trainee at Amsted Rail, earning \$24 an hour, spending three days a week on the manufacturing floor and two days in the classroom at the KCKCC Technical Education Center. Yet this success story in the making did not come about through serendipity or happenstance; rather, it is a product of the Career Pathway Student Tours organized by WYEDC. Faustino was introduced to the FAME program during one of these tours and is now a great example of the career training opportunities available to Wyandotte County students. However, Faustino almost opted out of this transformative experience.

During his senior year at Turner High School, Faustino was on the fence about joining the WYEDC Career Pathway Student Tours organized in conjunction with his school. A classmate finally talked him into going by highlighting one selling point: a free Chick-fil-A lunch. The tour brought his group to several local employers before visiting the KCKCC Technical Education Center, where a program administrator spoke candidly about how much a young person currently enrolled in the program was earning. Within months of graduating, Faustino had applied to the FAME program, been selected by Amsted Rail, and begun the path that would eventually bring him back to that career fair table. His path from that field trip to that paycheck did not happen by accident. It happened by design.





Monica Brede, Vice-President of Business and Workforce Solutions at WYEDC, coordinates the Career Pathway Student Tours that set Faustino's story in motion. The tours bring students from all ten high schools across the county's four school districts to visit local employers, hear from industry professionals, and see firsthand what a career in manufacturing, healthcare, construction, or technology actually looks like. This year, Monica has organized more than 17 tours.

Each tour is structured as a full day. Students begin with a morning visit to a local employer, head to the KCKCC campus midday to tour the FAME lab and have lunch, and close out the afternoon with a visit to a second employer. The lunch itself is a moment Monica uses to illustrate the wealth of career opportunities that abound across the county's dynamic manufacturing sector. She has Chick-fil-A catered in, and before anyone eats, she walks the students through how the local manufacturing sector contributes to nearly every component of their meal. The buns come from Baldinger Bakery, a CH Guenther Company, in Wyandotte County. The packaging is manufactured at Huhtamaki in DeSoto. The ink on that packaging comes from Inx in Edwardsville. The chicken is sourced from Tyson, and the machinery used to cut each breast to Chick-fil-A's exact specification is made by Baader Food Systems USA, also in Wyandotte County. The restaurant they ordered from is locally owned by a Kansas City, Kansas resident. "We're trying to show students how everything in their life doesn't just magically appear," Monica says. Three of those companies, Huhtamaki, Inx, and Baldinger Bakery, sponsor the FAME program at KCKCC and fund these lunches.

Programs Already in the Classroom

The tours are only one part of the pipeline. By the time students join a WYEDC tour, many have already been developing relevant skills through career pathway programs embedded in their schools.

Within [Turner Unified School District 202](#), Hillary Madrid-Matthews, the district's Parent and Community Liaison, works closely with Turner's Career Pathway teachers and coordinates with Monica to organize tours for her district. Turner offers pathways in health science, building trades, culinary arts, web design, and communications, among others. Students who complete three sequential courses within a pathway earn a career pathway designation, a credential that signals focus and follow-through to prospective employers.

Hillary is quick to credit Monica for the work that goes into a tour before it ever begins. Coordinating the schedule and logistics with employers and KCKCC is time-consuming, and Monica takes it on entirely so schools do not have to. That frees up administrators and staff to focus on what is in front of them: recruiting students for the tours and refining the career pathway programs already running in their classrooms, rather than independently building relationships across the broader workforce development ecosystem.

At Kansas City Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS), [the Diploma Plus program](#) gives students access to 14 career pathways spanning health science, technology, energy and engineering, business, and more. Students who complete a pathway can earn industry-recognized credentials, college credit, or both. Both the Turner and KCKPS programs share a philosophy rooted less in credentials than in relevance.

Hillary has watched student behavior shift as the programs have grown. Students who see a direct connection between their coursework and a real future engage with it differently than students who treat it as a graduation requirement. A student in a construction pathway taking a math class that feeds directly into that work is going to pay more attention than one who sees the class as an obstacle. Faustino experienced the same shift. Before the tour, he was not motivated to strive to be an outstanding student. That changed after meeting Chuck Saunders, KCKCC's FAME and Automation Engineering Technology (AET) instructor, and his colleagues, whose enthusiasm and command of their craft led him to aspire toward expertise. The experience imparted an improvement mindset he carried into every classroom: keep an open mind, ask more questions, and get 1% better every day. It changed his relationship with learning itself.

The FAME Program: Earn While You Learn

The FAME program at KCKCC is the most direct path from school to a high-wage career. FAME began as an internal Toyota initiative in the 1990s, when the automaker realized an entire generation of skilled technicians was aging out with almost no one to replace them. It was formalized in 2013, transferred to the Manufacturing Institute under the National Association of Manufacturers in 2019, and launched in Kansas City in 2022. Since its inception, the national program has more than doubled in size, spanning coast to coast. Applicants to KCKCC's FAME program are selected via a draft-like process in which the employers working with the program bid on applicants. Students are sponsored by an employer from day one and are positioned for full employment with that same employer upon completion. The program's structure ensures that students do not finish their training wondering what comes next.

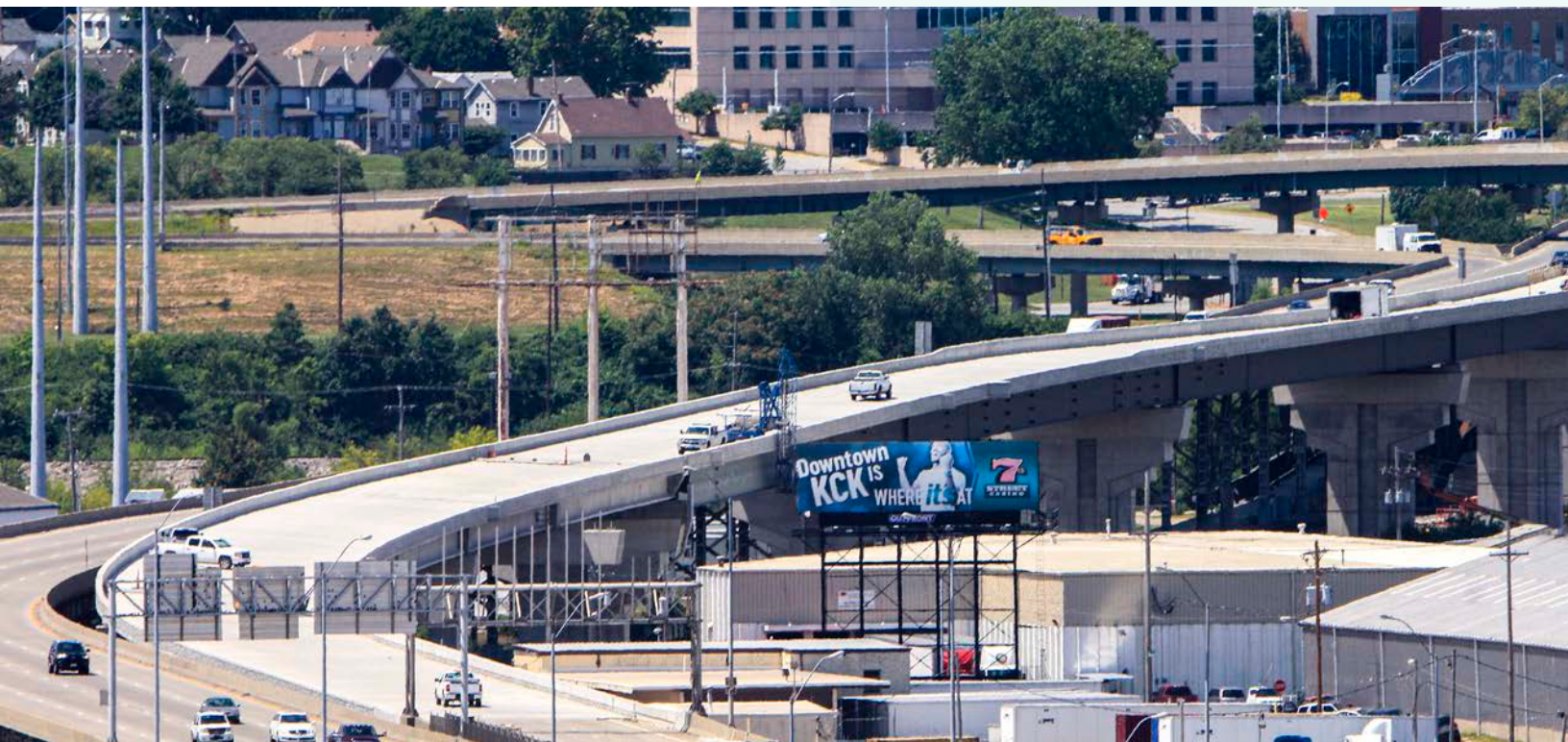
Since the program works directly with area employers, it seamlessly combines classroom learning and on-the-job training through a three-and-two structure: three days a week at a sponsoring employer, two days in the classroom at the KCKCC Tech Center. "You learn it on Monday," Chuck Saunders says, "and you're doing it on Thursday at full speed." The FAME program's curriculum covers a broad base of professional competencies. Students train across welding, robotics, hydraulics, machining, and fluid control. Chuck maintains a shared Teams page where he posts what students are covering each week, so employers always know what their sponsored student is learning in class. When a student is studying robotics, an employer can assign them to observe a real problem on the floor that same week. Chuck explained the program's training philosophy, noting that a facility could have the best robotics technician in the world standing next to a broken hydraulic hose, but if the technician does not know hydraulics, they are not useful. The motto is simple: no matter who is standing next to the machine when it breaks, that is the right person for the job.

“Nobody wants you to fail. They want to push you to be better.” — Faustino Palacio

FAME also differentiates itself from a standard technical program through its integrated approach to professional development. Chuck is direct about preparing students to be not just capable technicians but future maintenance managers. Accordingly, professional behaviors are woven into every class. Topics like dress code, punctuality, communication, and accountability are not siloed into a standalone course but built into how the program operates every day.

Faustino has taken to his split schedule quite well and commends the program's balanced approach and his employer's support for his studies. Three days a week, he is on the floor at Amsted Rail, troubleshooting machinery alongside experienced coworkers. Two days a week, he is in Chuck's classroom, building the technical expertise he can leverage at his job site. "Nobody wants you to fail," he says. "They want to push you to be better." After five semesters, he will graduate debt-free with an associate degree and two years of hands-on work experience at the company that sponsored him from the start. Fully credentialed maintenance technicians at Amsted Rail earn between \$38 and \$42 an hour, a salary that annualizes right at the \$80,000 mark that Monica cites as a typical outcome for FAME graduates. For Faustino, that figure is not a distant aspiration. It is the natural endpoint of a path he is already on.

The broader picture for credentialed technical students in the region is equally compelling. Chuck receives cold calls from employers several times a month asking if he has anyone available. His answer is almost always the same: they are all already working. For students across Wyandotte County who are willing to pursue these pathways, the question is not whether a job is waiting; it is which one to take.



Why the Pipeline Matters to Wyandotte County's Economy

The classroom-to-career pipeline described in this article is not just a story about students finding good jobs. It is a story about a county deliberately investing in its own economic future.

Before any company commits to building a new facility, workforce availability is a critical question. A two-billion-dollar investment in a factory is only as strong as the region's ability to supply the labor to operate it. Against this backdrop, Wyandotte County's classroom-to-career infrastructure becomes an economic development asset in its own right. Chuck has fielded visits from companies actively scouting manufacturing sites, and he notes that simply having a FAME chapter can tip a site selection decision when a city is being compared against a comparable market that lacks one. That advantage is further reinforced by career pathway programs across the county's high schools that actively cultivate student interest in technical and manufacturing careers. The WYEDC then plays a vital role by connecting those students directly to area employers through career pathway tours. This approach gives businesses a direct line into the county's developing workforce long before a position ever opens up.

For businesses already operating in the county, the pipeline functions as a retention and recruitment tool. Monica's business retention visits regularly surface companies struggling to fill technical positions through traditional hiring channels. The career pathway tours and FAME program offer an alternative: employers who engage early gain priority access to a steady stream of locally trained, employer-ready talent, reducing turnover and recruitment costs.

These outcomes align directly with Great Jobs KC's regional mission of helping 50,000 Kansas City metro residents secure family-sustaining careers by 2032, a goal that spans six counties across Kansas and Missouri, including Wyandotte. Programs that put students on a path to \$80,000 salaries within five semesters of graduating high school are exactly the kind of outcomes that move that number.

Get Involved

The pipeline described in this article is open. Students interested in applying to the FAME program at KCKCC can submit an application at fame-usa.com. Employers looking to sponsor a student or join the local FAME consortium can visit fame-usa.com and select "I'm an Employer," or explore partnership opportunities at kckcc.edu. Employers interested in hosting a career pathway student tour or connecting their workforce needs to Wyandotte County schools can contact Monica Brede at the Wyandotte Economic Development Council at mbrede@wyedc.org.

Wyandotte Economic Development Council's EcoDevo 101

Wyandotte Economic Development Council's focus on building the county's workforce improves the county's economic development ecosystem, by pulling the pieces of the puzzle together: workforce development, business retention, and a stronger quality of life for the students and families this pipeline serves.

What does the puzzle's total picture look like? Prosperity for Wyandotte County residents. A student who moves from a classroom into a \$24-an-hour trainee position — and eventually into a fully credentialed, \$80,000-a-year career — represents a household with more spending power. Multiplied across the workforce development pipeline, this same outcome provides businesses with a steadier source of skilled labor, strengthens the tax base of communities, and helps the county make a stronger case to recruit the next major employer. It's EcoDevo 101, and it's what WYEDC does. The best news is, there's always room for new pieces for our prosperity puzzle.





Wyandotte County Economic Development Council (WYEDC) helps businesses harness “The Power of the Dotte.” WYEDC promotes and strengthens Wyandotte County’s economy through innovative approaches to programs, partnerships and incentives, as well as leadership in industrial, residential, office and retail markets. Contact them today! Follow WYEDC on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#)!

FAME^{USA}

The FAME program at Kansas City Kansas Community College pairs students with sponsoring employers from day one, combining classroom instruction with real on-the-job training. Graduates finish debt-free with an associate degree, two years of hands-on experience, and a direct path to a high-wage career. [Learn more at fame-usa.com](http://fame-usa.com).



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