



Agency for Workforce Innovation

Charlie Crist
Governor

Monesia T. Brown
Director

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Contact: Cynthia Lorenzo
(850) 245-7114

Governor Crist Presents National Workforce Award to Senator Gaetz
~ Gaetz is recognized for his significant contribution to Florida's workforce system~

Tallahassee – Governor Charlie Crist today presented Senator Don Gaetz with the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), William L. Heartwell, Jr. Award for his contributions to Florida's workforce system and the development of the Florida Career and Professional Education Act. Joined for the announcement by Agency for Workforce Innovation Director Monesia T. Brown, Governor Crist honored Gaetz for further fostering a statewide partnership between both the workforce and education systems.

"I applaud the efforts of Senator Gaetz. His hard work has resulted in the creation of state-wide career and professional academies that allow education to be demand-driven," said Governor Crist. "Through an exciting partnership between the business, education and workforce communities we are exploring ways to transform Florida's classrooms, address our workforce needs, and create a pipeline of skilled workers."

NASWA is a national organization composed of state administrators of employment and training services, labor market information and unemployment insurance from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. This national award is presented to one person annually. Senator Gaetz was nominated by Regional Workforce Board directors Mary Lou Reed and Rusty Skinner and is Florida's second Heartwell Award recipient. Former Lt. Governor Toni Jennings received the award in 2005.

"Senator Gaetz is a valuable asset to the workforce system," said Director Brown. "His incredible diligence and drive have transformed Florida's workforce services and paved the way for the next generation of skilled workers by recognizing the significant connection between education and a successful workforce."

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As Superintendent of Okaloosa Schools from 2000 to 2006, Gaetz founded the CHOICE Institutes, which allow high school students to simultaneously earn national industry certifications in high-demand careers while earning high school diplomas and college credits, all without cost to the student.

Declared a national model for career education by the US Department of Labor, CHOICE is now being replicated in more than a dozen Florida school districts. Thousands of students are enrolled. The typical CHOICE graduate leaves high school with technical certifications awarded by industry and college credits worth over \$18,000. Many of these students had been underperformers or potential dropouts. CHOICE students are now doing better in math and as well in reading as the overall populations of their schools.

Elected to the Florida State Senate in 2006, Gaetz developed and gained passage of innovative legislation aimed at leading Florida forward in economic development. Being recognized with the Heartwell Award is a national testament to his commitment to creating an educated workforce, more rigorous and relevant curricula, and market-driven schools.

“This is a team award, not an individual honor,” said Senator Gaetz. “Okaloosa’s CHOICE Institutes became Florida’s model for career education. Now, with the passage of the Florida Career and Professional Education Act, our state has become a model for America in linking the resources of public education to the workforce needs of regional economies, all for the benefit of students.”

Patterned after the highly successful CHOICE (Community High: Okaloosa Institutes for Career Education) model which began in Okaloosa County, the act requires each school district to establish a joint venture with local industry and private or public universities and colleges to establish at least one career and professional academy driven by local market needs by the 2008-2009 school year. The act provides weighted funding if students achieve national industry certification in a career field.

Approximately 42 percent of youth do not pursue a post secondary education, making it imperative to prepare them to enter the workforce after high school with job skills that match the needs of local businesses. The CHOICE model and the Career and Professional Education Act give students the nationally-recognized training and credentials they need for immediate high-paying employment while keeping all doors open for additional education from technical colleges to universities.

Later this fall, Senator Gaetz and Director Brown will begin visiting locations throughout Florida discussing Career and Professional Academies with local community leaders. They will highlight the role the academies play in connecting Florida’s workforce needs with the development of responsive curriculum that ultimately leads to highly trained, industry certified workers.

The Agency for Workforce Innovation is the lead state workforce agency. The Office of Early Learning, a division within the agency, provides oversight of Florida’s school readiness programs and is the lead entity for implementing the state’s Voluntary Prekindergarten program. AWI directly administers Early Learning, Labor Market Statistics and Unemployment Compensation programs along with various workforce development programs.

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