

April 24, 2005; <http://www.communityshoppers.com/jm.html>

## In search of Homegrown engineers

*Programs would boost education opportunities*

---

**By Eric Kuznacic**  
Staff Writer



JANESVILLE — Two initiatives — independent from one another but similar in scope — are being proposed by local government, education, and business leaders to encourage engineering education in local high schools and colleges.

Officials from several Rock County high schools are considering implementation of an enhanced engineering curriculum. Developed by Project Lead the Way, the curriculum is used in conjunction with math, science and technology-based classes.

The nonprofit organization is concerned about the number of engineers nearing retirement age, and also aims to raise graduation rates of students in engineering-related disciplines. The group estimates that half of all students who begin college-level engineering programs do not complete their degrees.

Steve Huth, career and technical education coordinator for the Janesville School District, is piloting efforts to institute the PLTW curriculum in Janesville's high schools. He believes the program would benefit students and local businesses.

"The business community and the (Department of Public Instruction) approached us about instilling a more rigorous and relevant core structure for math, science and technology classes," Huth said. "They were looking for ways to get more students interested locally in math, science and technology."

Huth said high school representatives from Clinton, Edgerton, Milton and Beloit Memorial also are considering the PLTW curriculum. Clinton is the only district to commit to the program thus far. Officials there plan to offer the program on a limited basis for the 2005-06 school year; the other districts hope to implement the program beginning in 2006-07.

As an incentive to school districts that implement PLTW, the Kern Family Foundation provides grants to help offset costs. The Kern family, owners of Waukesha-based Generac, sold off a portion of their business in 1998 and endowed the foundation with \$60 million, in part to underwrite engineering education programs. Huth said these grants would be pursued to help the Janesville school district adopt the PLTW curriculum.

Matt Weber, vice president of human resources and director of the industrial production group at Janesville-based SSI Technologies, says the PLTW program will help the community as a whole.

“(PLTW) gives local kids the opportunity not only to train in the community, but to stay and work in the community,” Weber said. “It gives them the chance to make long-term contributions.”

Weber also serves as chairman of Forward Janesville’s Education Council. He says both PLTW and a proposed four-year engineering program at the University of Wisconsin-Rock County will alleviate the state’s “brain drain” — students who are educated in Wisconsin and then move elsewhere to start careers.

The UW-Rock County proposal is working its way through the state Legislature. If approved by the Senate and signed into law by Gov. Jim Doyle, it would boost engineering education at UW-Rock County.

Assembly Bill 53, authored by Rep. Debi Towns, R-Janesville, and co-sponsored by the remaining Assembly members who represent Rock County, would offer UW-Rock County students the chance to complete a four-year engineering program.

The program — offered in conjunction with UW-Platteville — would offer introductory classes during the 2005-06 school year. The governor’s proposed 2005-07 spending plan includes a provision for the program; however, funding doesn’t start until fall 2006. Towns’ bill would provide funding this year.

UW-Rock County Dean Janet Philipp expects funding this year.

“Local businesses have always faced a challenge in recruiting engineers,” she said. “This program will give local business and industry support to hire engineers ... they can grow their own locally, in a sense.”

Towns’ bill includes funding for two years.

“(This bill) represents a good investment on the part of the state in higher education that will foster more technical, higher-paying jobs,” she said.

State Sen. Judy Robson, D-Beloit, agreed.

“No longer will high school graduates and working people have to leave Rock County to pursue an engineering degree,” she said.

Forward Janesville’s Jim Lyke is involved in bringing both programs to Rock County. Lyke, the organization’s vice president for education and government relations, testified March 17 in support of Towns’ bill before the state Legislature’s Joint Finance Committee. He also is working with school officials and PLTW staffers to promote that program in local high schools.

Lyke said feedback from the local business community indicated a need for more local engineering talent. Forward Janesville and local business leaders have committed to raising \$300,000 for the construction of a new engineering lab if the program is approved.

Doyle rejected a similar plan for UW-Rock County in 2004 because — according to Lyke — the governor did not like the fact that the Joint Finance Committee inserted it into the budget. Lyke said he and Forward Janesville’s education council expect the funding to be approved this time around. He said he expects the state Senate to vote on the bill in early May, and hopes it hits the governor’s desk shortly thereafter.

Plans for the UW-Rock County program have been in the works for four years. If approved, the program could accommodate approximately 200 students.