S \newcommand{S}{since organizing more than six years ago, the Workplace Learning Connection (WLC) has touched the lives of thousands of students and hundreds of businesses in the Cedar Rapids/Iowa City Technology Corridor™.}

Director Mary Lou Erlacher says connecting students with regional businesses through job shadow, practicum and intern programs positively influences their career choices and awareness of local career opportunities.

Erlacher and Joe Raso, president of the Iowa City Area Development Group and WLC chair, took that message to Des Moines where they met with Kris Bell, Gov. Tom Vilsack’s advisor on education initiatives and legislation, and representatives from the Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa Department of Economic Development, Iowa Workforce Development and area education agencies.

Raso and Erlacher are lobbying state officials to fund similar programs throughout the state.

Erlacher says, “Statistics prove partnering with businesses in a dynamic system will build our future workforce and assist economic development. The Workplace Learning Connection helps students prepare to enter and succeed in the new world of work.”

The Workplace Learning Connection mission connects Iowa’s efforts to keep young workers in the state. WLC puts the Skills 2006 recommendation No. 3 into practice by encouraging businesses and educational institutions to place more emphasis on work-based learning experiences to improve retention of area high school and college students. (The Skills 2006 report is on-line at www.iowacityareadevelopment.com, click on Media Center, Workforce Publications.)

The WLC has offices in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City to assist students in Benton, Cedar, Johnson, Jones, Iowa, Linn and Washington counties. The staff coordinates activities matching students’ career interests to nearly 200 careers in area businesses. Students spend two to eight hours at an individual worksite. These opportunities allow students to observe and explore real-life work and learn about future opportunities.

Students interested in practicum and intern programs apply and interview for an opportunity. Students earn credit as they participate in a 45 to 90 hour experience.

High school and college students may receive dual credit through Kirkwood Community College for career specific classes and work-based learning opportunities.

WLC also coordinates speakers for elementary school students. Erlacher says they are the beginning of a skilled future workforce. “If we want to educate students about Iowa’s opportunities we need to market our career opportunities just as cleverly as any major brand,” she adds.

The Careers on Wheels (COW) program, teaches young children about the importance of skills such as listening, following directions, teamwork and attendance. Erlacher says hearing a firefighter, police officer or mortician speak and seeing professionals use “school skills” every day reinforces the importance of reading, writing and math skills – not to mention the fun of seeing vehicles that are used in these careers up close!

Tours, speakers and career fairs give students the information to make better post high school education and career decisions. Erlacher says, “We receive testimonials every week from students we’ve served saying how much they learned and how much the experience influenced their decisions where to live and work after school.”

Erlacher says we appreciate our partners’ efforts. “Our business partners make the ‘connection’