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## At Durango High School, budding business moguls off to state competition

DECA program develops leadership, analysis know-how in real-world setting

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Photo by: Courtesy of Durango School District 9-R

Paxton Scott, a member of the Durango High School DECA Club, presents his report about increasing employee engagement at Pediatric Partners of the Southwest to Kristin Polens, clinical director of early interventions with the practice. His plan includes changes to hiring techniques and improving communication between staff members and management.

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By [Ann Butler](#) Herald staff writer

Entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs didn't wait until they graduated college to get their careers going, and neither are the students involved in Durango High School's DECA program.

Previously known as the Distributive Clubs of America, now only as DECA, it describes itself as "an organization for emerging leaders in marketing, management, finance, hospitality and entrepreneurship." The program teaches leadership, public speaking and analysis skills – and requires presentations in business attire.

"DECA integrates authentic experiential learning experiences into the classroom," said DHS teacher Dave Dillman, who teaches marketing classes and serves as the DECA adviser.

DECA works best with involvement from the business community, he said.

Student Paxton Scott, for example, recently gave a presentation about a project he had undertaken for Pediatric Partners of the Southwest to increase employee engagement. He began with research, he said, conducting a survey, a focus group, a number of individual interviews, observation and secondary research, including area demographics.

He presented his end result to the group and Kristin Polens, an administrator at the practice. Among his recommendations, Paxton included altering hiring techniques to assess what factors motivate a potential employee, improving internal communications between staff and management with bimonthly one-on-one interviews and offering one paid day for volunteering to support employees' connections with the community.

Paxton isn't just handing over his plan and stepping back. He will conduct follow-up research as the plan is implemented, including a survey in three months, evaluating the turnover rate at the end of the year and holding a second focus group with employees who worked at the practice both before and after the changes.

Another way DECA members demonstrate what they are learning is by role-playing and taking tests at district, state and national competitions.

Dillman must be doing something right. At the last two Western Slope Colorado DECA Districts, his students won the Advanced Proficiency Award. The award is calculated by averaging all role-play and examination scores from all participants, and Durango students finished in first place among a field of 165 students in 27 events.

Fourteen members qualified to go to the state competition, including Paxton and teammate Abby Scott, who won the Marketing Communication Team Decision Making category.

"It was a fantastic experience because it was challenging and fun at the same time," said ninth-grader Jack Beatie, who won first place in Principles of Business Management and Administration and is one of the students who qualified for the State Leadership Conference.

"I'm excited to see where DECA takes me," he said.

DHS senior and DECA officer Charles McClung received a singular honor, earning the highest exam score among all the participants.

The state conference will be held from Feb. 20 to Feb. 23 in Colorado Springs.

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