

## Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 2 – An Interview with Pikes Peak Business & Education Alliance

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**Scott Anderson:** This is Scott Anderson, I am the Communications and Public Relations Manager for El Paso County, and today I am here with Bob Gemignani, who is the Director of Pikes Peak Business and Education Alliance. How are you doing today, Bob?

**Bob Gemignani:** I'm doing great, Scott. Thanks for having me.

**Scott:** Good. No, thanks for having me. I'm really excited. This is actually an organization that I've been really happy to get to know really what it is you do for the community. And so, I'm really glad I could help facilitate this conversation today. So, can you share a bit of background about the PPBEA? How long have you been in El Paso County and what is your main mission?

**Bob:** Sure. Well, first off, we love being your pet project, Scott. So, thank you.

**Scott:** Absolutely.

**Bob:** So, the PPBEA just finished its third school year of operation. We serve 20 school systems in El Paso and Teller Counties. That number has grown over the three years. We started with 15, and we've added five new school systems. Our mission is to connect students, talents, interests, and aptitudes to the world of work. So PPBEA serves as a functional intermediary between all of our separate fragmented school systems in El Paso and Teller County, of which there are many. And the world of work, meaning our industry partners and trade association partners and community partners to help execute that mission.

**Scott:** Great. And can you tell me a little bit about the people you serve and in what communities? I know you talked a little bit – El Paso and Teller counties – could you dive in a little bit there as well?

**Bob:** Yeah. So, we – our program is open to subscription or engagement from any organized K through 12 school system in El Paso or Teller counties, and that includes all the rural towns of Calhan and Ellicott and Yoder way out in east El Paso County and Cripple Creek and western Teller County. So, of those, there are 17 school districts in El Paso and Teller counties. We have 15 of them participating with our initiative. And then we also have five charter academies that are part of what we do. Over the three years

that we've been here, we've also recruited almost 400 business partners to participate in this mission of helping students connect their academics and what they're learning about through career exploration with actual experiential learning opportunities with these business hosts.

**Scott:** Sounds great. So, the PPBEA, you received 98% of your funding through ARPA grant funds. Can you talk to us a little bit about what that money has gone to fund, those programs specifically?

**Bob:** Absolutely. So, from July of 2021 through now, we've received almost a half-million dollars of ARPA funding, which has been critical for us to operate our program. What that money's been utilized for is about three and a half full-time employees who are serving 20 school systems, almost 400 business partners with nearly 7,000 interactions between individual students at those 20 school systems and those business partners. So, we help administrate, organize, structure those interactions between students in classrooms and business partners. We also – the funding was really critical for a couple of other areas. One of those was, as part of our initiative, we record career interviews with local professionals in various occupations where we elicit their storytelling about how they – what they wanted to be when they grew up when they were young, how they navigated themselves to their current roles and what the challenges were, what advice they would give their younger self. So, we've done about 220 interviews in the last two and a half years. Where we were struggling was editing those videos with limited experience from our staff, so we were able to divert \$100,000 – or \$52,000 of that money to hire a local production company-

**Scott:** Oh, that's great!

**Bob:** -to help us professionally edit those videos. And they've done a stellar job making them more concise, shortening them from, you know, 45 minutes of raw content to a 15- to 20-minute consumable video for a student. And then we also received a little over \$100,000 to help subsidize pay for high school interns where most employers would not be likely to pay an intern for 60 hours. This funding has helped us subsidize students to get paid for minimum wage for 60 hours of work.

**Scott:** Oh, that's incredible. And I think important for both the business and the student, right? That opportunity to get paid for the internship. Because, you know, certainly I remember doing internships that were not paid, and it's a grind. You know, it's a lot of work and there's a lot expected of you, as I'm sure a lot is expected of these high school students.

**Bob:** Absolutely. And it really did help transform the way that students and employers engage the internship process. Knowing that it was going to be paid versus unpaid.

**Scott:** You mentioned earlier the interactions that happen between the students and the businesses. You've had 7000 those. Can you tell us a little bit about what those interactions look like and sort of how that's facilitated between the two sides?

**Bob:** Yeah, so there's a best practice that PPBEA adopted from the Colorado Workforce Development Council called the Work-Based Learning Continuum. That continuum has very recognizable activities on it, like a site visit to a local manufacturing facility or hospital. It could be a professional coming into a classroom to talk to students about a particular career in engineering. It could be a student doing a Zoom informational interview with a local professional that's in an occupation of interest for that student. It could be a one-on-one job shadow for a high school student going to a local business and just kind of mirroring or shadowing a local professional-

**Scott:** Sure.

**Bob:** -in an occupation that student is interested in. And then last, but not least, is a 60-hour internship, which is kind of our crème de la crème activity for a student who's in late high school who has sort of identified a particular occupation that they're very interested in to get a short duration, outcome-driven training, that would be a resumé enhancement for them. So, when we talk about these almost 7000 interactions, those are individual students interacting in any one of those activities throughout the school year.

**Scott:** I'm wondering if there's a personal story, maybe from someone who has benefited from the services you guys provide that you can share, whether it be a business owner or maybe a student or even maybe a parent of one of the students.

**Bob:** Yeah, so let me start with kind of a broad outcome that's been really cool, and you were part of our summer intern celebration a few weeks ago. So, this summer we placed 48 interns with 18 business partners in three different industry areas or occupational areas, and we're learning that about 25 percent of those students that completed those 60-hour internships have actually been hired-

**Scott:** Oh, that's incredible.

**Bob:** -by the host business partners, whether it's part-time or full-time.

**Scott:** Sure.

**Bob:** So, clearly what we call the last mile for like a junior or senior high school student, that last mile of a student going from like an experiential learning opportunity, like an internship, to an early career entry, that's the last mile we're trying to bridge and help students, you know, kind of travel that path from an internship to an early career. So, the result this summer kind of illustrates that that concept is being proven.

**Scott:** Yeah.

**Bob:** That through an internship, a student can make it to early career. One of the business partners was Luchals Catering. This summer she hosted four culinary interns. I think she hired all of those.

**Scott:** Wow.

**Bob:** And as you know, during COVID, a lot of the hospitality and restaurant businesses have just been devastated, right? Closed down, everybody scattered, all their workers scattered. So, this has been a great opportunity for a lot of our culinary and hospitality partners to re-recruit early career students from high school and, you know, kind of bring them on board as entry level employees. We also had a great example of a student story. There was a student that was enrolled in the Pikes Peak Workforce Center [unintelligible] young adult program, which is funding set aside from the federal government to help students with barriers to education and employment. This student had a disability and was enrolled in that program, and the program utilized PPBEA's relationships and platform to actually place that student in an automotive internship that he didn't have access to before. So, the student went through that 60-hour internship with a local automotive company called EXO Auto Works. And it was a really solid experience for that student to kind of test drive a career that he thought he wanted to go into and confirmed through that experience that that's the kind of occupation he wanted to pursue.

**Scott:** Yeah. And in that example, you shared, you know, someone who had an idea of what they wanted to do, had an opportunity to do it, and they realized, yes, that is what they want to do. Can you talk a little bit about maybe the other side of the coin, right? How valuable it is for someone to have an opportunity to work with an organization or business that they think they might want to and then come to find out maybe they actually don't want to go into that field?

**Bob:** Yeah. And it's just as important for a student to be able to kind of test drive an occupation they're interested in through a job shadow or an internship and rule it out as much as rule it in. And at the summer internship celebration, you actually heard testimonies from a few students of the 48 who realized, you know, hey, after doing this internship, I really enjoyed it, and I got some great experience with it, but this isn't me. This doesn't match what I think I want to do. So, very important to have that outcome.

**Scott:** Awesome. And like I said, a great organization. Something that I found to be really valuable. Something I wish was around when I was in high school, right? I think we could all benefit from something like that. And for those who want to get involved right, whether it's a student who wants to look into internship opportunities, business owners who want to become part of the group that host interns, and they may not know where to start, right? Can you tell people where they can look and how best they can help for you guys?

**Bob:** Absolutely. So, the best place for everybody to go is to our website at [PPBEA.org](http://PPBEA.org). It's organized in two lanes – business and education, which is really what we are. So, if there's a student, or a teacher or a parent, they can go to the entire website and browse it. But there's particularly good information in the education side to support a student. And if you're a business partner that wants to be part of this great innovative initiative here in El Paso and Teller Counties, and you'd like to on-board with a PPBEA, you can go to the business side of the website and there's actually information you can review

there and a sign up form that – we'll get an e-mail for it and contact you to help educate you about what we're doing and on-board you on to our initiative.

**Scott:** Awesome. And then lastly, just because you had mentioned it, if there are people who are listening who have some of those amazing career stories that they think might be valuable to share with, you know, high school kids and potential interns. How can they get in touch with you guys to talk to you about recording those career stories?

**Bob:** Same place, PPBEA.org. Go to the business side and you can, you know, use the sign-up form. And when you do the sign-up form, there's an area for you to comment. Just say, hey, I'm interested to record my career story.

**Scott:** Okay, great. Well, Bob, thank you for the time. Really appreciate it and really appreciate the work that the PPBEA is doing here in El Paso County.

**Bob:** Thank you very much, Scott.