

# Growing Our Own

## A Closer Look at Hamilton County's Future Ready Institutes

BY CATHERINE SMITH

In the current job market, many of Chattanooga's top employers are grappling with a greater need for employees who have specific skills and qualifications. On the other hand, many young people in our area face challenges that limit their access to these high-demand careers after high school. Future Ready Institutes are Hamilton County's answer to both problems. Read on to learn more about these revolutionary programs taking place in our public high schools from some of the local organizations making them happen.



**Miles Huff**  
Director of Community Engagement, Cempa Community Care



**Chris Mathis**  
Community Outreach Coordinator, Cempa Community Care



**Michelle Powell**  
Health Innovation Coordinator, Erlanger Health System



**Dr. Jennifer Lynberg**  
Tyner Future Ready Liaison, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga



**Doug Chapin**  
President & CEO, See Rock City, Inc.



**Dr. Olivia Bagby**  
Future Ready Students Director, Hamilton County Schools



**Dr. Kim Wingate**  
Interim Co-Director of the School of Education, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga



**Danny Deas**  
President, NOVONIX Anode Materials



## What is a Future Ready Institute?

Essentially, Future Ready Institutes (FRIs) are schools within a school that offer students a more focused education. FRIs allow students in 13 Hamilton County high schools to participate in small, theme-based learning cohorts designed to prepare them for post-secondary success – either in college or in a career. Many of them are sponsored by local organizations, and participation is free of cost to the students.

Dr. Olivia Bagby, Future Ready students director for Hamilton County Schools, explains, “Hamilton County has offered career and technical education for many years, but this was an opportunity to really shake things up and take it one step further for the students who are ready to dive into a particular pathway. This partnership between Hamilton County Schools and our local business partners has given our students the opportunity to start exploring career possibilities on a much larger scale. It’s changed the way education happens and has given students something to get excited about again.”



### Students can choose from a wide variety of programs, including:

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Agriculture
- Architecture & Construction
- Arts
- Audio/Visual Technology & Communications
- Business Management & Administration
- Education & Training
- Food & Natural Resources
- Health Science
- Hospitality & Tourism
- Information Technology
- International Baccalaureate
- JROTC
- Law, Public Safety, Correction, & Security
- Marketing, Distribution, & Logistics
- STEM
- Transportation

## Supporting Students

### COLLEGE-READY

Some FRIs, like the UTC Institute of Teaching and Learning at Tyner Academy, help prepare students for success in college and careers that require a degree. For Dr. Kim Wingate and Dr. Jennifer Lynberg of UTC, this program is an excellent opportunity to support the next generation of educators. “A lot of students know they want to be teachers, but there are many, many different avenues to that,” Dr. Wingate says. “This program helps them narrow down their choices before they even start college by giving them an opportunity to experience different professions within education.”

These programs also offer support systems for students who may be the first in their family to attend college or pursue a certain career. “For us, it’s about community connections and individual connections,” Dr. Lynberg explains. “Wherever these students go, we want them to have a line of connections. It’s a really holistic approach to supporting students.”

## CAREER-READY

Career-focused FRIs give students the opportunity to gain the real-world skills they need to enter the workforce after high school. For example, the Cempa Institute of Leadership and Public Health offers students the chance to graduate from high school as a certified medical assistant

(CMA). “We teach them everything it takes to be a CMA including basic vitals, how to move patients, and phlebotomy,” says Chris Mathis of Cempa. “After completing the test and graduating, they’ll be certified through the National Healthcare Association and qualified for any medical assisting job.”





These certifications are a great opportunity to jumpstart a successful career, and they also serve as stepping stones for career advancement in the future. “We’re creating a pipeline so students can have jobs waiting for them when they graduate,” says Michelle Powell, coordinator for the Erlanger Institute of Healthcare and Innovation. “It’s a great option for students who are interested in post-secondary education but also need to fulfill a financial obligation to their family or themselves. In the interim, it gets their foot in the door.”

“We want to make sure students have the resources and knowledge to make those choices. I want every one of our students to end up in a career that they want, a career that they chose, and a career that they’re excited about,” Dr. Bagby says.

## Boosting Businesses

With the increasing need for a highly skilled workforce in our city, FRIs offer our employers a unique opportunity to spark interest in their industries and inspire the next generation to pursue a future with their companies. NOVONIX Anode Materials, for example, hopes to generate interest in engineering and technical fields with the NOVONIX Institute of Advanced Battery Technology. “With the current drive toward electrification, we are trying to build a supply chain of battery materials here in North America to reduce our dependence on foreign materials. This is a very technical shift, and the techniques for making these types of materials are very advanced, so we need to develop a workforce that is highly skilled and highly technical,” explains Danny Deas, president of NOVONIX. “We think investments like this are worth it. It’s invaluable for young people coming out of high school to know that there are good jobs available for them. If nothing else, it’s worth impacting these young people’s lives.”

For leaders who may want to get involved with these programs, Miles Huff of Cempa Community Care has some advice. “When it comes to talent development and creating a pipeline of people to fill in the gaps in these industries, I would encourage people to think creatively about what that can look like. Some businesses have the capacity to write a check, and that’s great. Others, like Cempa, also have somebody from our staff, Chris Mathis, who works directly with these students as a teacher and a mentor,” Huff says. “Regardless of the size or scope of your business, if you know that talent is a need for you, I’d encourage you to invest in the Future Ready Institutes. It’s absolutely worth your time and finances.”

## Changing our Communities

In 2022, the Tennessee State Government reported that 65.6% of students in Hamilton County were economically disadvantaged, with 18.6% of our children living below the poverty line. Students born into low-income families often face significant socioeconomic obstacles that prevent them from attending college or accessing opportunities for high-paying careers after high school. This opportunity



gap has become increasingly apparent in recent years, but with state funding and sponsorships from local businesses, FRI participants can access the opportunity to build a successful future for themselves regardless of economic status.

Many of these programs have created important bridges between companies and the communities they call home. According to Doug Chapin, CEO of See Rock City, Inc., that's been one of the most rewarding results of working with The Howard School. "A lot of these students are coming in from really difficult life circumstances," Chapin shares. "An assistant principal at Howard, Dr. Charles Mitchell, said, 'You can't be what you can't see. We may be three miles away, but it might as well be 3,000.' The FRI is a really practical way for us to help connect them with opportunities." Recalling a recent ceremony for a group of over 40 graduates, Chapin says, "I asked how many of them had been to Rock City before, and only four students raised their hands. That's one of the things that really hits me – that's why The Howard School is so important. They are our neighbors and so close. We want these students to know they have a place here."

While Cempa, Erlanger, UTC, NOVONIX, and Rock City come from vastly different industries, each group noted that working with these students has had a massively uplifting effect on their organization as a whole. "It takes a lot of people to support a program like this, and we've all become very emotionally invested in these students," Powell shares. "Two of our seniors just graduated with full-ride scholarships to Emory University. Those success stories really make our community here at Erlanger proud."

