

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**December 20, 2006**

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**Lt. Governor Announces New Initiative Aimed at Strengthening  
Florida's Career Education Programs**

TALLAHASSEE — Ensuring that career and technical education programs in Florida prepare students for the high-skills, high-wage jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the goal of a \$1 million grant announced today to establish the Employ Florida Banner Center for Career Academies.

The grant, from Workforce Florida, Inc., is being awarded to the Okaloosa County School District CHOICE Institutes. Okaloosa Schools will establish a go-to center that will create standards for quality and accountability for Florida's myriad career education academies and serve as a resource for districts seeking to re-engineer their career and technical education programs to better meet the current and future demands of businesses in their communities.

“This initiative will maintain our high educational standards and offer support to a cutting-edge initiative that was begun in the Okaloosa County School District by Sen. Don Gaetz when he was superintendent,” said Lieutenant Governor Toni Jennings. “Florida's young people will have unprecedented opportunities as they enter the workforce prepared for success.”

Okaloosa's CHOICE Institutes have been recognized as state and national models for career education. Started in 2001, CHOICE Institutes offer students high school and college credits as well as professional certifications.

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The district currently has seven institutes operating or planned in allied health, automotive maintenance, aviation and aerospace, construction technology, engineering, hospitality, and information technology. Students earn industry-recognized certifications and college credit for free.

The program is geared for college-bound students as well as those who intend to go directly into the workforce. And it has made strides in graduating students previously considered at risk of dropping out of school. CHOICE Institutes emphasize partnerships among secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, workforce boards and business and industry with course offerings and training linked to regional business demands.

“The CHOICE model is unique in that it allows students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma, university credits, and national industry certifications in high-paying career fields, all at no cost to them or their families,” said Sen. Don Gaetz (R-Niceville), Chairman of the Florida Senate Committee on Education Pre-K-12. “What also sets CHOICE apart from traditional vocational education is that private industry determines the curriculum and certifies mastery.

“This ‘center of excellence’ designation and financial award will allow us to leverage the successes of Okaloosa’s CHOICE Institutes throughout Florida.”

CHOICE stands for Community High: Okaloosa Institutes of Career Education. A recent study by the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida found, among other things, that CHOICE graduates are expected to earn about \$375,000 in additional income during their lifetimes compared to the anticipated earnings of average high school graduates.

“This really is a win-win-win for education, workforce and business and industry,” said Okaloosa School Board member Cindy Frakes, who was among a delegation of Northwest Florida education officials, students and business and workforce leaders who traveled to Tallahassee for today’s announcement.

Using the grant, Okaloosa Schools will provide technical support to districts throughout the state wanting to start new career academies or overhaul existing programs; develop standards and accountability measures for career education programs; and research and highlight best practices in career education that serve to help Florida maintain and improve its globally competitive workforce.

Workforce Florida is among those that have recognized Okaloosa for its transformation of career education, which has earned its students hundreds of industry-recognized certifications and more than \$1 million worth of college credits as well as high school diplomas.

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In fact, last year, Workforce Florida began a competitive grant program for school districts wishing to model their career and technical education offerings after Okaloosa's. To date, 11 school districts have been awarded more than \$2 million to replicate the CHOICE Institutes and have launched programs in areas including aerospace, construction, health sciences, information technology and manufacturing.

“We have to expand opportunities for all students to achieve and raise their potential,” said Curtis Austin, President of Workforce Florida. “This Employ Florida Banner Center for Career Academies allows us to do so, while also improving the pipeline of work-ready employees who can help sustain Florida businesses and support their expansion.”

The new Okaloosa County-based program is part of a \$6.2 million strategic initiative of the state workforce system to create centers of excellence, known as Employ Florida Banner Centers, which are charged with developing a well-skilled workforce for key Florida industries. These centers are part of the Employ Florida network of state and local workforce partners and services.

For more information on Employ Florida Banner Centers, please go to [www.EmployFlorida.com](http://www.EmployFlorida.com).

For more information about CHOICE Institutes, go to <http://www.choiceinstitutes.com/>.

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Workforce Florida, Inc., (WFI) is the state's chief workforce policy organization and principal architect in the efforts to meet the current and future workforce needs and challenges of Florida's businesses and citizens. WFI is a state partner, along with the Agency for Workforce Innovation, in the Employ Florida affiliate network of 24 business-led regional workforce boards and nearly 100 one-stop centers that provide employment solutions throughout Florida. Learn more about Florida's workforce resources and solutions at [www.EmployFlorida.com](http://www.EmployFlorida.com).

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