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Press Release

Sen. Durbin joins West Side Pols and manufacturers for visit to acclaimed Manufacturing Renaissance program at Austin College and Career Academy

Chicago, IL December 11, 2017: As headlines blare dire news about violence, school closings and economic hardship on the city's west side, Manufacturing Renaissance's program at Austin College and Career Academy is shining so brightly it is attracting national attention, including a visit from US Senator Richard Durbin this Friday.

Sen. Durbin, joined Alderman Emma Mitts, State Representative LaShawn Ford, and Craig Freedman, CEO of Freedman Seating for a tour of the Manufacturing Connect (MC) career pathways program this Friday. The ten-year old program, operating inside Austin College and Career Academy high school through partnerships with Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union Foundation, and generous support from local manufacturers, provides exposure, training and support to both in-school youth and out-of-school young adults to pursue careers in manufacturing.

Senator Durbin, a big supporter of education and career-track training programs, often speaks about the importance of nurturing the nation's manufacturing sector. "Manufacturing is a critical component of our economy in Illinois and across the country. Manufacturing Renaissance's work educating young adults for careers in advanced manufacturing is not only an investment in the next generation of our workforce, it's an investment in the future of Illinois," said Durbin.

Senator Durbin hadn't been able to visit the program since his endorsement helped them secure a grant from the Department of Labor in 2001. Friday he was capable of seeing the return on that investment. "When students get good paying jobs at places like Freedman Seating, the community gets wealth from the wages that circulate in Austin and our companies get the talent they need to expand. That will help reduce violence and rebuild our middle-class," said 37th Ward Alderman Emma Mitts.

MC's Industry Coordinator, Dee Dee Jones, testifies to such quotes by noting that there are over 15,000 high-paying vacancies in the Chicagoland manufacturing industry and that MC has relationships with over 100 companies who are eager to hire skilled people to help them remain competitive. "We provide wrap around mentoring, tutoring and personal care to both our students and to our roster of manufacturers," she said. "And once the employee and employer become accustomed to one another, we find they match-up really well," Jones said. One of the very active industry partners is Freedman Seating. They manufacture many of the seats on CTA buses. "We love the students from Manufacturing Connect. They are job ready from day one," said Craig Freedman, CEO of the company.

For Release

About Manufacturing Connect

MC is the signature program operated by Manufacturing Renaissance (MR). MC, which links high schools to real opportunities in the surrounding manufacturing sector, was named in November as one of America's best programs of its kind by the Century Foundation, a highly respected national think tank based in Washington DC. The program is also the only high-school program in Chicago to be accredited by the National Institute of Metal Working Skills (NIMS) for the applicability of its curriculum to real-world manufacturing.

MC Director of Operations, Erica Staley, is proud of what they've accomplished since the program launched in 2007. "Our students learn the hard and soft skills for the world of 21st Century Manufacturing. They have secured over 400 industry credentials, they've had more than 420 work experiences and paid internships and they've secured over 90 good paying, full-time jobs and financial support for college," she said.

The program is supported by the Chicago Public School system but is run independently by the team at Manufacturing Connect. "The MC team works closely with me and my staff at ACCA to make sure the students graduate with a college offer letter in one hand and industry recognized certifications in the other," said ACCA principal Patricia Reynolds. The MC program also works with the City Colleges to offer dual credit classes so that students pick up college credits while learning the curriculum with plenty of hands-on instruction. "One of the nice features of the program is that they work with students on every aspect of what it takes to succeed on the job, in school, and in life," said Reynolds.

MC also enjoys support from labor, community groups like the Jane Adams Resource Center, and Opportunity, Advancement and Innovation in the south suburbs.

About Manufacturing Renaissance

The mission of Manufacturing Renaissance is to help build thriving sustainable communities by connecting them to manufacturing through education, training and local ownership. The organization works with labor, educators, elected officials, community groups and industry to increase public and private investment in 21st Century manufacturing skills education.