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BY SUE ELLEN ROSS Post-Tribune correspondent

HAMMOND -- Dressed in a suit and carrying his resume, Matthew Yates patiently waited in line for a job interview.

But the Clark High School student wasn't really looking for a job; he was participating in a recent simulated job fair at Purdue University Calumet.

"We're here with our careers class," Yates said. "We learned how to write a resume and do research when job hunting."

Sponsored by I-STEM (Indiana Initiative for Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics), this year's event was directed by Daniel Luncsford, who works in the Center for Science & Technology Education at PUC. He also is the I-STEM coordinator for Northwest Indiana.

"The goal of the job fair is to expose students to real opportunities in STEM careers in Northwest Indiana, and to point out to the students what they need to do now -- not later -- to start preparing for these opportunities," Luncsford said. "This is just like a real job fair; individual students have one-on-one contact with the exhibitors in their booths."

Representatives from 25 local companies talked with hundreds of students from nine schools in five school districts. Grades 7 to 12 were represented.

The job fair served several purposes, said Lorraine Fioredelisi, PUC career services coordinator.

"This was a good opportunity for our office to partner with those interviewing today," she said. "And the students are learning how important it is to develop job-search skills."

Friends Geovonni Thorton, 15, and Shakyra Bullock, 15, want to be pediatricians. The Gavit students prepared for the job fair for several weeks in their careers class.

"I really enjoy this class," Thorton said. "We're learning life skills that are important for the future."

Bullock was impressed with the company representatives who talked at length.

"They told us what classes we would need to take and what skills we would need for the jobs they offered," she said. "This has been a pretty good day."

Elsa Martinez is a human resource recruiter for Sisters of St. Francis Health Services Inc., an umbrella group for seven area medical facilities.

Martinez said she was surprised by some of the student inquiries.

"The change in society is evident, as more women are taking leadership roles," she said. "Half of the girls stopping by my table are interested in careers as doctors, and the male students are surprised that we have many male nurses. In fact, we have four men in our nursing program."

I-STEM is a statewide initiative funded by the Eli Lilly Foundation. Its main goal is economic development by promoting STEM education and careers in Indiana. This is accomplished by building partnerships with kindergarten to 12th-grade students, teachers, K-12 school districts, higher education, business, and government. The job fair brings all these groups together, Luncsford said.

Gavit teacher Brian Weiland was proud of his students as they took their turns at the various booths. They were prepared, he said, as they had previously conducted research during his class, career aspiration exploration.

"But as they traveled through the job fair, they definitely learned about different options they weren't aware of," he said.