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Math class aids hopeful interns

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SPRINGFIELD - Justin J. Journet, a 17-year-old junior at Putnam Vocational Technical High School, knows he must pass the online math course he's taking for a shot at earning money and electrical experience this summer.

"We have to work hard to earn it," Journet said last week. "They just don't hand it out."

The "they" in this scenario is the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County Inc., which was recently awarded \$59,000 from the Northeast Utilities Foundation to continue its Technical High School Workforce Readiness Initiative in partnership with Western Massachusetts Electric Company (WMECO).

Since 2002, 35 students from Putnam and Franklin County Technical School in Turners Falls have participated in the career education program. This year, an online education component was added. Five students at Franklin County and seven students at Putnam are participating this year. They need to pass the online math course and all their other school courses to qualify for the full-time summer internships that pay \$10 an hour.

"The hands-on experience - they absolutely love," said Kathryn A. Kirby, youth employment coordinator for the employment board. "If they do very well, down the line, hopefully there will be an opportunity to be hired by WMECO."

Ken S. Garber, an account executive with WMECO who helps coordinate the program at Franklin County, said his company will be facing dramatic retirement numbers over the next five years. The company's aging workforce will need to be replaced with new workers, he said. Over the past seven years, WMECO has hired three students from the workforce readiness initiative program.

"It's a nice partnership for WMECO with the vocational schools. It gives us an opportunity to see students coming out of there who could be prospective employees for WMECO," Garber said. "It gives them real world experience. It lets them learn beside veterans in the industry."

The student interns work hard during the summer, putting in 40-hour workweeks. Juniors are chosen to participate in the two-year program.

"It's a nice summer job. It pays well. It offers that career opportunity," Garber said.

This is the third year Northfield resident Chris P. Zukowski, an 18-year-old senior at Franklin County, will participate in the program. It will be his third summer as an intern. He is now a mentor to other students.

"I'm hoping to get a job with WMECO," Zukowski said.

His summer internship with the electric company was the first job he ever held. He said spending the

summer with real line workers has been a positive experience.

"They're nice people. They make it easy to learn," Zukowski said. "I've learned a ton."

WMECO invested more than \$100,000 in the program during its first six years to pay for the summer internship program. Northeast Utilities Foundation is funding the program this year and next with a \$236,000 grant, which includes the \$59,000 the employment board just recently received.

In addition, the students must complete a Workplace Readiness Certificate Program, a 10-hour course that helps them with job-readiness skills, such as resume writing, time management and interpersonal relationships.

"It's very comprehensive," Kirby said of the program.

This year's online course is titled "Mathematics for Electricity: Careers in Power." In September, another online course will be featured.

"The problems they're given in math are real on-the-job problems," said Sonia P. Kjergaard, the site coordinator at Putnam. "It's a paid internship and they are excited. They're working hard to qualify."

William J. Kerivan, an electrical instructor at Franklin County who is the site coordinator there, said the program is a "win-win" opportunity for the students.

"It gets them involved with a known company for one thing. It also gives them the opportunity to learn about power distribution," Kerivan said.

Journet said he's staying focused on his ultimate goal.

"I'd like to walk right into a job," Journet said. "So far, everything is going good. We just need to pass the course."

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