



War on Poverty: Bridging gap between education, manufacturing jobs

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9 educational paths to manufacturing jobs and middle class

SPRINGFIELD — **Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy** student Ebony Canuel, 15, could, upon graduation, join the vanguard of a new breed of advanced manufacturing workers.

At least, that's the hope of a passionate team of school officials, teachers, the non-profit **Regional Employment Board of Hampden County** and the owners of small- and medium-sized enterprises collaborating to prime the pipeline with manufacturing workers of the future – and an opportunity for those workers to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle.

Canuel was one of a dozen students recently, half of whom are girls, enrolled in an introductory course in advanced manufacturing in Ron Messier's gleaming, spacious shop at the high school. Students were using sophisticated machinery to fashion blocks of metal into a tic-tac-toe game.

Canuel wasn't interested in manufacturing at the start of the school year, "but I am now," she said, on a recent morning in the shop class.

Messier said there is a critical shortage of workers to fill jobs at local manufacturing enterprises. And without skilled workers those high-paying jobs – with a starting salary ranging from \$45,000 to \$55,000 – will go unfilled. And if those manufacturers can't grow and thrive, the community and its residents will be a lot poorer.

David Cruise, executive director of the regional employment board, said business leaders and educators are determined to introduce students, who might not otherwise consider a career in manufacturing, to the challenges and opportunities the jobs provide.

Messier said Putnam invites interested eighth graders to an exploratory visit to the school to check out offerings from cosmetology to retail sales and from carpentry to health services. "Advanced manufacturing is not their first choice," he said.

"They have no idea where products come from and no idea how they are made," he said. Once they get their hands of the machinery, many of them are hooked, he said.

"This is a hidden secret," Messier said.

The group of leaders working with Cruise are determined to let the secret out by mentoring kids, inviting students to their companies for tours and raising money for advanced manufacturing equipment for schools on tight budgets.

There's work to do, too, in convincing parents that going to college after high school graduation might not be the best choice for their child.

Edward Leyden, president of Ben Franklin Design and Manufacturing in Agawam, is one of the leaders of the effort, providing internships for students studying manufacturing at Putnam and Springfield Technical Community College – another source of skilled employees for his company.

Leyden and others were instrumental in advising Putnam and other schools to invest in their vocational programs, which, he said, "were anemic" six or seven years ago.

Leyden and others are beginning to see results. There is a 300-student waiting list to enter Putnam, according to a recent study conducted by the Northeastern University School of Law.

Putnam expects to graduate about 18 students from the manufacturing program next spring, but the number falls far short of the growing need regional manufacturers have for skilled workers.

The renewed interest by students presents manufacturing advocates with another problem – finding teachers with the advanced skills to work with vocational students.

Jack Healy, director of Worcester-based Massachusetts Manufacturing Employment Partnership, had praise for the work being done by the regional employment board and Springfield leaders.

A resurgence in manufacturing can help put a lot of people on the pathway to the middle class – a pathway that has been disrupted, Healy said.

Healy said the fact that China's manufacturer's concentration on lower-end goods gives the U.S. an opportunity to focus on high-end products.

Coming Wednesday: Head Start gives children an educational boost.

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