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Tech schools working with businesses hungry for trained workers

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Savannah Sweeney wields a welder and plasma cutter, training sparks and heat on sharp edges to forge soft, fanciful artwork.

The 17-year-old from Orient sells her welded metal roses. She programmed a computerized “burn table” to carve out a butterfly and a hummingbird. She’s especially proud of a competition piece that took 52 hours to make: a metal castle with a drawbridge that can be raised and lowered, and a dragon perched majestically on the highest turret.

When she got the opportunity in 10th grade to leave Teays Valley High School to learn a skilled trade, Sweeney went for it. “I looked at the list and asked, ‘What do I want to do that’s creative, that’s fun and that’s something I can’t do anywhere else?’” she said.

So she makes the 35- to 45-minute drive each morning to Eastland Career Center in Groveport.

Career-technical education — once known as vocational training — is in vogue. The economy has bounced back after the Great Recession, but the worker supply has not met demand.

“It’s good news when we have 4 percent unemployment,” said Kelly Fuller, an Eastland administrator. “But it’s bad news when jobs are going unfilled.”

According to the computer-science advocacy website Code.org, the country has more than half a million computing jobs open. In August, the Associated General Contractors of America reported that 73 percent of Ohio construction companies said they were having trouble finding qualified workers, compared with 70 percent of construction companies nationally.

President Donald Trump had only one thing to say about education in his State of the Union address last month: “Let us invest in workforce development and job training. Let us open great vocational schools so our future workers can learn a craft and realize their full potential.”

“We’ve been here for 40-plus years, and we’re just now being discovered,” said Brian Wilfong, spokesman for the Career & Technology Education Centers, or C-TEC, in Newark. He noted that Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida explicitly mentioned career-technical education during the 2016 presidential debates.

Career-tech is “the rage,” Wilfong said

Likewise, the Eastland-Fairfield Career Center would like to remind everyone that it has been around awhile. Officials say the breadth of programs probably would surprise parents — teaching, performing arts, pre-engineering — and the school is trying to do more to bridge the disconnect between education and the private sector.

The business community “knew to call. What we’ve done better is they know they’re going to get a callback,” said Eastland-Fairfield Superintendent Bonnie Hopkins.

Three years ago, the school named Fuller a business-partnership coordinator to make sure that businesses and students were getting what they need.

“Literally every day, it’s a phone call, an email to say ‘We need people,’” Fuller said. Business partners often end up donating equipment to help train the students and come in to serve as advisers.

C-TEC created a similar full-time position a year and a half ago. Windy Murphy now serves as the liaison between the Licking County career-tech school and local employers. She often is contacted by business owners who say their workforce is sorely lacking a skill and ask C-TEC to create a class or a curriculum for training, Wilfong said.

The efforts are paying off: The placement rate for Eastland-Fairfield within six months of graduation is 88.6 percent, according to 2016-17 state data. For C-TEC, it is 92.4 percent.

Tolles Career & Technical Center in Plain City has a business advisory council for each of its 22 programs, said Superintendent Emmy Beeson. The school uses the feedback from those business leaders to adjust its curriculum and internships.

The local career-tech schools have gone out of their way to be relevant to business and industry, she said.

Tolles can nimbly respond to demand, to a point.

“I wish it was faster,” Beeson said. “Whenever you’re dealing with government — and education is very much regulated — change is not as quick as it could be.”

Eastland-Fairfield is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. So what’s changed at the school, and career-technical education in general, over those five decades?

“Everything,” Hopkins said with a laugh. The school has expanded from 500 students at the Groveport campus in 1968, adding a Fairfield County campus and several satellite locations, which now serve about 1,400 high school students at a time. The center also teaches about 4,500 adult students annually.

Over the years, horticulture has morphed into landscape design for golf courses and patios. Computer networking has, within a short time, been eclipsed by cybersecurity. Drafting a design on paper has given way to computer-aided design, or CAD.

Vocational students now have the same academic requirements for graduation as their college-prep peers do, which wasn’t the case a couple of decades ago.

The schools say they are a great but underused resource for adults who need to retrain for a new career. Eastland says it has been working with newly arrived immigrants to teach them a trade and work on their English at the same time.

Last fall, Eastland opened a 5,000-square-foot laboratory space dedicated to teaching adults to service heating and cooling units. One corner even replicates a typical home basement, with exposed beams and a bit of clutter. Fifteen students are in the nine-month HVAC program, said instructor Walter Rhodes, and placement is very high.

“There’s more jobs than we have students,” Rhodes said.