

# Western Massachusetts vocational-technical high schools partner with industry to build skills for jobs



The machine technology shop at Franklin County Technical School in Turners Falls includes both new computerized machines and older machines.

By [Cori Urban | Special to The Republican](#) on February 14, 2014 at 5:08 AM

[MONTAGUE](#) –Sixteen-year-old Brandan J. Tarbox, of Wendell, likes working with machines.

“I love this machine shop,” he said as he worked on a Haas TL-1 computer numerical control lathe in the machine technology program at [Franklin County Technical School](#) in Montague.

He likes learning to use the new equipment in the shop and understands he is training for a job when he graduates, “a well paying job,” the teen adds.

The machine program is but one of myriad programs offered in area vocational and technical high schools which help students like Brandan prepare for their future and help the regional economy.

It’s not that long ago, though, when the Turners Falls school’s machine technology program had been sorely outdated with some of the manual machines dating back to the 1940s; thus students could not develop the skills needed for jobs in the region’s machining industry.

The Program Advisory Committee, including several business owners of precision manufacturing companies, went to work to modernize the program. A coalition formed, comprised of 14 businesses, [Greenfield Community College](#), the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board and Franklin County Technical School.

Funding, totaling \$550,000, came from the businesses and state to purchase 14 Haas Automation machines; Haas discounted the machines by \$217,000. The employment board secured a state grant of \$240,000 for an evening adult education program to cover two years (four rounds) of training.

The evening program is designed to train unemployed and underemployed workers. The first round of adult education has graduated, and the second round was due to begin on Feb. 3.

Demand for skilled precision machinists is critical to area businesses, so it is hoped that with the adult and high school classes, those employment needs can be met, explained Jocelyn A. Croft, career and technical education coordinator and adult education coordinator at Franklin County Technical School.

“This is about preparing them (students) for careers and college,” she said.

Franklin County Technical – with 533 students in grades 9 through 12 – has 13 shops and technical programs. Popular are machine technology, programming and web design and cosmetology.

With such programs, public technical high schools are leading the charge to get young people trained for careers which will fulfill them and provide them with steady incomes.

But to do that, school administrators and boards must listen to business and industry leaders.

They help the schools determine the job training needs in the area.

The Franklin County School, for instance, has no marine motor technology program like a Cape Cod school. “That would make no sense for us,” Croft said. “But there is a lot of precision manufacturing here” so a machine technology program is essential.

Yet all programs serve a purpose, said Principal Richard J. Martin. “They all have a need in any given year.”

At [Westfield Vocational Technical High School](#), an advisory committee comprised of representatives of local businesses and industries gives advice about needs in various fields, upcoming trends and what is happening in those fields. Eighth-graders also help gauge programs of interest.

All this input helps school officials learn “what’s hot, what’s happening and what’s popular,” said Principal Stefan J. Czaporowski. “We are taking our lead from business and industry as we should because that is what we’re gearing our kids for.”

There are currently 12 shops and programs at the 486-student, grades 9 through 12 school in Westfield. The newest component is a programming and web development program implemented in August, which, along with computer networking and repair, is part of the information technology program.

Though most programs are capped at 16 students per grade level, 18 freshmen were admitted to the IT program, according to Czaporowski.

IT and manufacturing technology are the most popular programs among freshmen. Said Czaporowski, “People have a true perception that there is a job out there waiting for them when they get out of here.”

Last year, 100 percent of the seniors in manufacturing at Westfield Vo-Tech did a co-op program to get job experience while still in school, and they all got jobs after graduation.

The situation is similar at [Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School](#) in Palmer where, in 2012, 100 percent of machine students got jobs in machine technology after graduation.

“There are plenty of job opportunities for our students in machine fields,” said Eric A. Duda, vocational director at Pathfinder. “Everything is growing and expanding” in that area, he said.

In fact, the machine program is the most sought-after program at Pathfinder with the maximum 16 students from each grade enrolled in it; and there is a waiting list.

There is also a waiting list for the electric and carpentry programs, which Duda attributes to an upswing in the economy and more construction projects. “We’re delighted to see such a demand,” he said.

The newest program on the slate of 15 at the 680-student school is hospitality, a program in which students are trained to be hotel and restaurant managers. Added in September, the program was a reaction to the potential for a resort casino to be located in the region, said Mary Jane Rickson, assistant superintendent and director of the program.

“We want to stay current, and with casinos making a bid (to come to the area). We want to help our students be employable (there),” Rickson said.

B. Barry Bacom, principal of [William J. Dean Technical High School](#) in Holyoke, said his school is seeking to modernize and revamp all programs. There are 12 shops and programs at the grade 9 through 12 school with about 500 students.

“Dean has been chronically underperforming,” he said, acknowledging that the slate of offerings is “not aligned with what industry needs in this area.”

Thus, effort is being expended to research and study “where the jobs are” in Holyoke, in the region and in the nation, he said. That will help build related programs at the school where health services, carpentry and graphic communications are currently the most popular programs.

Like other schools, advisers at Pathfinder help administrators determine what programs to offer.

“We look at all the programs to make sure we’re on target to meet students’, the community’s and workforce needs,” Rickson said. “We assess that all the time.”