



Left: Machinist apprentice Brycen Walker learns on the job as part of a Randolph Community College program. Right: N.C. State Technology Training Solutions classes provide a strong foundation for students looking to acquire new skills or certifications.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

State educators train and maintain a local workforce.

On the first Friday of October, 225 Randolph County eighth-graders boarded nine school buses for a day of local-industry plant tours and hands-on activities at Randolph Community College's mechatronics, machining and welding labs.

Manufacturing Days, to be repeated in March for 10th-graders, is a part-

nership among RCC, the Randolph County School System and Asheboro City Schools as part of Apprenticeship Randolph to showcase manufacturing career opportunities. Nine businesses participated in the October event.

The apprenticeship is one of several innovative workforce initiatives across the state to promote close-to-home careers by dipping into elementary, middle and high schools.

"Developing a pipeline of well-skilled, educated citizens whose economic mobility is constantly improving is what our 58 community colleges do every day. One focus is to identify youth apprenticeship opportunities," says Maureen Little,

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vice president of economic development with N.C. Community Colleges.

Apprenticeships and work-based learning through community colleges are helping businesses educate and keep local employees.

Chris Chung, CEO of the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, says the state has two streams of workforce growth. The state's organic workforce includes graduates of local high schools and two- and four-year colleges, as well as job seekers exiting the military. The second stream comes from migration to the state. That second stream amounts to a strong flow mainly benefiting big cities. The first needs development.

"The organic can't change overnight. You get more people into your technical colleges where they learn the skills they need to be successful, and it takes time," Chung says.

In August, the Eastern Triad Workforce Initiative, a public-private partnership for on-the-job training, awarded \$3.2 million to the Triad counties of Alamance, Guilford, Randolph and Rockingham to support apprenticeship programs in targeted industries.

"Randolph County is heavy in manufacturing, and we are addressing the need through a variety of programs," says Stacey Miller, pathways activities coordinator for Apprenticeship Randolph.

Chris Harrington, director of operations at private label compression garment designer and manufacturer Elastic Therapy in Asheboro, says apprenticeships are a practical step for his company.

"We participate in the [Randolph apprenticeship] program for a few different reasons, and one of them is that we cannot find the talent that we need, so

we realized that we're going to have to grow the talent," he says.

Apprenticeship Randolph began with 12 partnering businesses and has added four. Career choices range from tool- and die-maker to welder, machinist, instrumentation technician, robotics technician and other fields.

Wilson Academy of Applied Technology opened in 2016 and collaborates with Wilson Community College in manufacturing and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) training. All students take Advanced Manufacturing I and II, and the school and college have ties with 14 area businesses. WAAT's outreach to local students begins in fifth grade.

"The plan is to create a pipeline of qualified employees, from the school to the workplace, to replace the retiring baby boomers," says Principal Krystal Cox.

In Gaston County, high schoolers transitioning to the workforce through college programs are honored with a signing day, similar to athletes signing a national letter of intent. Gaston College's Center for Advanced Manufacturing held its inaugural signing day ceremony in May and another in September for apprentices receiving their journey-worker certificate.

"It celebrates the high-school senior who is going to sign on with a local employer and shows the 'cool factor,' if you will, of going to work for local industries," says Brett Buchanan, director of career technical education for Gaston County Schools.

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College received an ApprenticeshipNC Regional Collaboration and Expansion grant from the N.C. Community College System in October to implement a regional apprentice system. A-B Tech is overseeing the effort with Blue Ridge, Haywood, Isothermal and Southwestern community colleges.

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“We make really good connections with the students,” says Kevin Kimrey, economic and workforce development director at A-B Tech, and the college is able to explain to students that these are well-paying jobs.

Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte has 20 area clients, mostly in manufacturing and distribution. CPCC and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools also operate a Middle College High School program on four local campuses for students in 11th grade and higher. The National Science Foundation recently renewed a \$1.5 million grant to CPCC and partner colleges Forsyth Technical Community College and Guilford Technical Community College to increase the number of underrepresented minority students pursuing STEM degrees.

Guilford Technical Community College is building a co-admissions

program with UNC-Greensboro for biology, to begin in fall 2019. Guilford, along with James Sprunt Community College in Duplin County and Johnston Community College in Smithfield, also pushes industry-specific training.

With a budget that can fall between \$10,000 and \$50,000, JSCC can customize a project through the N.C. Community College System and Department of Commerce.

New buildings are aiding the workforce process in area-specific ways.

Wake Technical Community College’s Corporate & Business Solutions division offers courses in information technology, project management, team building, business competitiveness and leadership, with more than 20 clients. The school opened its \$47 million Research Triangle Park campus in Morrisville in August, billing it as its “next generation learning environment,”

with technical and corporate degree programs and credentialing.

Johnston Community College broke ground in July on a \$5.9 million Student Success Center that will house career-placement services, academic advising and counseling.

Pitt Community College in Winterville received a \$500,000 grant in July from Vidant Medical Center toward equipment for a simulation hospital opening in January. The \$1.3 million project will allow the nursing program to expand from 225 students to 275 by fall 2019.

Donna Neal, dean of PCC’s Health Sciences Division, says most of the students enrolling in PCC health-sciences programs are from this region. “They were born here, have grown up here, and want to find a job here.”

Fayetteville Tech is reducing recruiting and training costs for local employers through an initiative that places students in jobs at area businesses relevant to their major at the beginning of each 16-week semester, giving students a run at potential permanent employment.

Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington received a \$200,000 investment from Duke Energy Corp. in July to assist its Power Line Technician program. Funds are used toward tuition and equipment, including line-worker tool kits.

But the journey often begins in high school.

“I am a firm believer in the Frederick Douglass quote: ‘It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.’ It is my job to push students to their potential through encouragement, love and a vision for the school that enables them to have authentic industrial experiences that lead to successful futures,” says WAAT’s Cox. ■

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer based in eastern North Carolina.



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