

Future of jobs looks familiar

Sunday, January 10, 2010

By CORI URBAN

GREENFIELD - In a town once known for its machine tool industry, young people are again being urged to consider a career in manufacturing.

Eighth-graders at Greenfield High School recently spent 45 minutes in small groups inside the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership Mobile Training Unit learning about computer numeric control machining, computer-aided drafting and computer-aided manufacturing.

The bus-sized training unit, which was parked outside the school for two days, is equipped with 12 computer stations and two computerized mini-machines that perform actual machining operations. It also has a video system that allowed students to watch two videos on career opportunities in the precision machining industry.

All 108 eighth-graders participated in the program, which is part of their career exploration curriculum.

"Our message is that, 'You can be anything you want to be,'" said Kerry C. Heathwaite, eighth-grade team leader. "We expose them to a variety of careers."

She noted that a recent study by Northeastern University in Boston estimates that Massachusetts could see more than 100,000 jobs opening in manufacturing by 2016.

The goal of bringing the mobile training unit to the school was to provide students with information on manufacturing as a career with the hope that the data would assist them and their parents in making an informed decision about where they will go to school in the ninth grade.

Under the direction of Matthew R. Healy, of Charlton, program instructor for the Woburn-based Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, about 10 students per session learned how to program a computer to have the machine cut a star in a circle in a small block of blue material. "That's so cool," one student exclaimed as they watched the cut being made.

Stephanie M. Dancause, 13, of Greenfield, said she liked watching a computer numeric control lathe make a chess pawn. "It was amazing," she said.

Stephanie said she "probably could" have a career in manufacturing, an industry she said could be used to create a product for "people who need it."

Classmate Eyan J. Raymond, 13, of Greenfield, found the entire program interesting. "It taught me a lot about computer programming and how to make shapes with CNC machines," he said. "It could be a career I'm interested in. I enjoy working with computers."

Healy said the program promotes manufacturing in the United States and "keeping good-paying jobs here."

Though not every student would be interested in a manufacturing career, Heathwaite said all of the eighth-graders were engaged in the program, enjoying the hands-on learning.

The program is funded by a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Healy also has taken the program to Frontier Regional School in South Deerfield.