

“Teens enter vocational school, come out with jobs, no debt”

Kids used to go to college to avoid working minimum-wage jobs in factories. But nowadays kids are going to vocational school to get high-tech factory jobs working with computer programs and robotics.

By Eun Kyung Kim, TODAY contributor

When he decided against going to a traditional high school, Warner Adams got teased. But now he's getting the last laugh.

“People always make fun of vocational school, but now they're like, ‘Oh man, I wish I went there,’” said Adams, now a junior at Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School, where every recent graduate found a job upon graduating.

In Massachusetts, where the school is located, the average starting salary in manufacturing is about \$45,000. “I can make as much money as someone going to college, coming straight out of high school, and I don't have to pay for college loans or anything like that,” Adams said.

Pathfinder is a beneficiary of a program called “Amp It Up,” a Massachusetts initiative to encourage students to explore careers in advanced manufacturing. Instead of offering dark and dusty shops full of woodworking or table saws, many vocational schools are now full of state-of-the-art machines and computers that teach students code, programming and design skills.

That has made these schools wildly popular. “There is a waiting list for the shop right now for kids who want to get into it,” said Pathfinder’s principal, Mary Jane Rickson. “The machine shops are clamoring for people right now. They can’t expand because they don't have any highly skilled people.”

And experts predict demand will only increase. Over the next decade, Massachusetts expects to create 100,000 new advanced manufacturing jobs, the largest growth of any sector. Many of those new jobs will be in biotechnology and involve creating medical components.

“The question is, how do we make sure the opportunity is there to get the skills level across the need in our economy,” said Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick.

He said the answer involves changing people’s perceptions about vocational schools. “College is right for many, but not for everybody,” Patrick said.

It certainly didn't appeal to Michael Rhodes. "I knew from a very early age that I didn't want to do it," said the 19-year-old employee of Marox Corporation, a contract manufacturer of precision-machined components he said. "It's not for me."

Rhodes has purchased a new car and is now saving to buy his first home. But he warns that manufacturing work is not a simple task.

"It's easily the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," he said.