



Scott Pope, machine tool teacher at Claremont's Sugar River Valley Regional Technical Center, chats with Stevens High School students Katelin Boardman, 15, Cody Larison, 14, and Patrick Boggess, 15, during a hands-on manufacturing class he teaches at Whelen Engineering in Charlestown. (Meghan Pierce)

Whelen Engineering joins school sowing seeds for manufacturing

Introduction to technology:

It's cool said one student, and a pathway for a new generation of manufacturing employees.

By Meghan Pierce

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CHARLESTOWN — A new collaboration between the Claremont School District and Whelen Engineering Co. Inc. aims to boost interest in manufacturing in young people in the Upper Valley Region. Learning how to work at a station inside the Charlestown manufacturing plant, which specializes in emergency- and warning-light systems, 16-year-old Stevens High School sophomore Akeem Bailey said the introduction to technology class offered through the Claremont School District at Whelen is a lot of fun.

He has been learning how to work with lasers and UV light. "I like this class 'cause I like hands-on things. I like to work with machines," he said. "We learn a lot. I enjoy coming here."

He adds he had never considered working in manufacturing before, but now views it as an option. "Good work, good benefits, good time, good life," he said.

Stevens freshman Katelin Boardman said she wanted to take the class because she had toured the Whelen campus last summer while participating in a technology camp. "I thought it would be fun to learn more about the company," Boardman said.

A member of a 4-H robotics team, Boardman said she was drawn in by the robotics, and has enjoyed discovering the interworkings of the company.

The 45-day class gives the students an introduction to the different aspects of manufacturing at Whelen. "It's pretty interesting," she said. Fall Mountain Regional High School senior Jacob Kirk Stevens, 18, sums the class up in one word, "cool."

He took the class because he thought it would be a good opportunity to learn and would look good on his resume.

So far, he has enjoyed learning about robotics and sheet.

Stevens sophomore, Dorian Bolden, 15, said he was surprised how much fun the work atmosphere is at Whelen.

"You get to meet new people every day, and you learn something new every day," Bolden said.

Those students are part of the sec-

ond 15-week introduction to technology class offered at the Whelen campus through the school district, and interest is growing.

More than 100 students applied for the third class, which starts in April, but only 14 spaces were available, said John F. Olson, president of Whelen Engineering.

Olson was Whelen's first full-time employee when the company started 55 years ago.

"I saw the demise of manufacturing in the United States, from its high point in the '40s and '50s, when we won wars because of it. And then I saw it leave in the '60s and '70s, leaving thousands out of work," Olson said, "to off-shore manufacturing."

Long before President Barack Obama's State of the Union address in January, when he said that educators and manufacturers should come together to train the next generation of manufacturers, planting the seed that the manufacturing industry is a viable career option in the minds of young people was something Olson had wanted to do for many years, he said.

"How do you intrigue young people to think about manufacturing?" Olson asked himself.

His answer was the way profes-

sional sports teams do: Start with children in Little League and junior teams. “That’s how they begin to recruit or interest kids into going into professional sports. Why can’t we do that in manufacturing?” Olson said.

Last August, when SAU 6 Superintendent Jacqueline E. Guillette retired, Olson asked her to design a course that could be held at Whelen.

“It’s great. The thing about John and Whelen is they have made a commitment to this without, in the near future, seeing a return,” she said.

“Their bet, and mine, is that when these young people get to graduation of high school or when they are going onto a certificate program or a community college, some of them will have their interest piqued enough to consider this as a career opportunity.

“So it’s really visionary and forward thinking that he would pay an educator to bring students here,” she said.

Olson and Guillette had come to know each other as members of the Governor’s Advanced Manufacturing Education Advisory Council.

“We both knew that today’s budget would not allow public schools to purchase the kind of equipment needed to create the kind of authentic environment today’s manufacturing requires,” Guillette said. “(Olson) said ‘I would like to open up Whelen Engineering to students to let them understand that this is not manufacturing of the ‘80s.’

There are a lot of robotics and state-of-the-art equipment at Whelen, which is updated every couple of years, she said. “At public school, we don’t do that. We run things until they don’t work anymore.”

Guillette said she worked closely with Scott Pope, the machine tool teacher at Claremont’s Sugar River

Valley Regional Technical Center, to design the class curriculum. He is now the class instructor. Olson has given Guillette and Pope a full run of the facility as a learning laboratory for the students, she said. The course also teaches me students how to dress appropriately for work, people skills and how to fill out a job application.

The Claremont School Board pays for transportation to and from Whelen and pays Pope a stipend for adding a class to his already full schedule. And Whelen employees offer their time during their workday to train students on equipment. “(The Claremont School District) really bought into this. They understand that manufacturing is going to bring our country back. So they really support it,” Guillette said.

The class is open to other area schools and has two Fall Mountain Regional students.

Currently, U.S. manufacturing is in a catch-22, Olson said. “We’ve got to have people to get the jobs from offshore and we need the people who are interested in manufacturing.”

In New Hampshire alone, there are about 1,000 job openings for machinists, he said.

“New Hampshire is a great place for manufacturing, we just have to build up the manufacturing skill levels of the people,” Olson said. “Or retrain those who are unemployed, get them involved in learning new skills sets and get them to work. That’s where the community college system helps.”

Whelen employs close to 700 people at its Charlestown location. Its total of 1,400 employees includes workers at its manufacturing facility in Chester, Conn., and small sales offices around the world.

“John is quick to point out he has jobs here for (all) people, from those

who have difficulty learning all the way up to triple Ph.D.s, and everything in between,” Guillette said. “There are all kinds of jobs. It’s not just master’s degrees and above. It can employ anybody in the community.”

The curriculum is also offered to manufacturing companies interested in creating their own program, and a request has been made to create a middle school-appropriate class and tour of the plant.