

Workforce: The next generation

Apprenticeships create a direct pipeline to skilled talent

BY NIKKI KALLIO



PHOTO COURTESY OF KI

Julian Rivera-Colon, right, a former youth apprentice, is now a plastics operator/assembler at KI. He is shown with team leader Danette Heyrman.

FOR THE PAST 18 YEARS, Green Bay furniture maker KI has been working with the next generation of manufacturing talent through its youth apprenticeship programs.

“We’re developing the future workforce,” says Claire Wittmann, human resources manager at KI, which won the NEW Manufacturing Alliance’s Youth Apprenticeship Manufacturing Award in 2017. “We’re giving them skills to succeed, and we’re showing them the different careers and opportunities that exist in a manufacturing environment. That’s pretty important.”

The urgency to develop skilled workers isn’t lost on manufacturers throughout Northeast Wisconsin, and

statewide, where workforce leaders and educators are doing more than ever to build programs to keep up with workforce demands. The state has one of the oldest school-to-work youth apprenticeship programs in the country, managed by the Department of Workforce Development since 1991.

Yet, American industry lags other industrialized nations when it comes to these types of workforce development programs. A 2014 article in *The Atlantic* pointed out that 60 percent of German youth participate in a diverse array of apprentice programs throughout different industries, while fewer than 5 percent of American youth do the same.

But, things are changing.

ADDITIONAL AVENUES

High schools and technical colleges are just part of the overall apprenticeship package for prospective workers in the skilled trades. Many unions also offer their own apprenticeship and training programs. In March, IOM will explore the work of these groups in building a better workforce for the region’s future.

Statewide, participation in manufacturing, STEM and transportation/logistics-related apprenticeships among high school students has almost doubled from 544 students in the 2007-08 school year to about 1,097 in 2017-18, though current-year information is incomplete, according to the DWD.

Youth apprenticeships, which are operated through various regional agencies and organizations, require 180 hours annually of technical instruction and on-the-job mentoring, and students must work a minimum of 450 hours per year. They are paid at least minimum wage.

“The students are required to work between 10 and 13 hours a week, but we have a lot of students who are putting in far more hours than that,” says Tania Kilpatrick, director of Career & Technical Education for CESA 6, based in Oshkosh.

“I have students who are putting in thousands of hours over the course of a year — some kids are really engaged. *continued >*

“This is really a way for companies to sort of test kids out before they go into that long-term experience with them. It also shortens the amount of time that students are spending pursuing a partnership, and it’s communicating all the different opportunities for kids.”

— **Tania Kilpatrick**, director of Career & Technical Education for CESA 6

They want to get into the workforce.”

Northeast Wisconsin employers such as KI, Jagemann Stamping, Eagle Performance Plastics, Ariens, Team Industries and LDI have found success with the YA program.

Other companies have been slower to get signed on. Mike Cattelino, apprenticeship manager at Fox Valley Technical College, works to educate employers about the benefits of YA.

“A lot of times the employers — I think rightfully so — get a little nervous about having a 16- or 17-year-old working around some of the equipment that they have,” Cattelino says.

But for those worried about liability, state labor laws differ for youth apprentice workers versus regular workers under age 18, Cattelino says.

“I think it’s more a matter of getting our employers informed about the opportunity, and let them work through it with their leadership and insurance companies,” he says.

YA programs offer high school kids direct exposure to engagement with new career fields, often where workers are needed most.

“We have a math problem in our workforce right now, in that there’s more people leaving than there are coming in,” Cattelino says.

The new state requirement that mandates academic and career planning for each student starting in middle school offers even more opportunity to make YA enrollment more effective and efficient, he says. But it takes the companies and

educators working together to make it meaningful.

“Whenever I go and talk to kids at the high schools or middle school, I’ll pick a machine shop, for example, and I’ll say, ‘Do you know how many machine shops you passed on the way to school?’” Cattelino says. “Most of the time they have no idea, and it might be six or seven.”

KI works with both youth and adult apprentices. The company receives student resumes from the Greater Green Bay Chamber, and students participate in a normal hiring process with an interview. Some flexibility is required with scheduling for students who are still in school, Wittmann says.

“Some people might think we could do some projects in a quarter of the time, not thinking about the future and especially the way that the labor market is right now,” Wittmann says. “We need to catch people younger, teach them, train them and get them up to speed.”

KI has enjoyed the success of the program, evidenced by four past YA participants who are now full-time employees.

“It’s really cool to continue to see them grow and continue to be mentored with us at KI,” Wittmann says. “It’s really a win-win situation if you think about it. We’re getting people in, and it’s sometimes turning into long-term hires.”

Kilpatrick says some companies might not be aware that kids under 18 are capable of high-level, productive work on multimillion-

dollar machines. But manufacturing has the highest enrollment of the 11 industry YA programs. Construction is the second-highest, and CESA 6 is working to increase enrollment in IT, a swiftly growing area also in need of skilled workers.

“It kind of takes a workforce shortage for those areas to explode,” Kilpatrick says.

The CESA 6 district, which covers eight counties in eastern Wisconsin, including the New North counties of Outagamie, Fond du Lac, Green Lake, Winnebago and Waupaca, has 530 students enrolled in youth apprenticeships for the 2017-18 school year, with a 92 percent completion rate and 97 percent job placement rate for two-year youth apprenticeships.

The DWD program is continuing to evolve, now working on developing more “bridges” between youth apprenticeships and registered apprenticeships, or adult programs that combine certification with on-the-job training and usually last about four years.

“This is really a way for companies to sort of test kids out before they go into that long-term experience with them,” Kilpatrick says. “It also shortens the amount of time that students are spending pursuing a partnership, and it’s communicating all the different opportunities for kids.”

CESA 6 offers bridges in manufacturing and construction, and new ones are being developed for IT and health care, Kilpatrick says. FVTC is working on a bridge program that would apply to construction and industrial programs.

“Employers are realizing or beginning to realize they need to do things differently,” Cattelino says. “I hope we can be a spoke in that wheel of change to help them be more successful.” 

ON THE WEB

<https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/youthapprenticeship/>