



## The Republican.

### Program aids workers' training

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Business writer

CHICOPEE - Thomas C. Walker, of Greenfield, has been a machinist for 25 years.

Eric C. Padilla, 20, of Springfield, works in the shipping and receiving department at Hoppe Tool Inc. in Chicopee. But he wants to move onto the production floor as a machinist.

Both were among the 40 students who graduated last night from an incumbent worker night-school program sponsored by the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County and local precision manufacturers. Another 44 students will also graduate this spring, but their courses have yet to wrap up, said J. William Ward, executive director of the Regional Employment Board.

State Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Suzanne M. Bump was on hand for the ceremonies at the new Chicopee Comprehensive School, one of eight training sites for the program. Other sites are Westfield Vocational-Technical High School, Dean Technical High School in Holyoke, Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School in Northampton, Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School in Palmer, Franklin County Technical School in Montague, Springfield Technical Community College and the Smith & Wesson plant in Springfield.

In two years 575 students have enrolled and 500 have graduated.

But that's not enough people to meet the demand, said Larry A. Maier, president of Peerless Precision Inc. in Westfield and a past president of the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association. The 250 fine tooling companies in the 413 area code employ 7,500 to 10,000 people, he said. Retirements alone create 400 to 500 openings a year, Maier said.

"These are jobs where people can make \$60,000 a year after four or five years of experience," Maier said. "I just hired a person, and I could use at least one more. I'll have another opening in 30 days."

He said local technical schools graduate 30 to 40 people each year.

"You can go just about anywhere and get a job," Padilla said.

Secretary Bump said part of her job is making others understand the demand Padilla sees.

"We all see the headlines that manufacturing jobs are leaving," Bump said. "But these jobs are still out there."

Maier said students aren't paid for their time and volunteer for the courses. The courses last eight weeks, three hours a week.

Ward said the program has cost \$600,000 over two years, \$409,000 of that in state money and the rest from employers and the schools themselves. He said some students are unemployed off the street, but

most a currently working in the field.

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