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Manufacturing courses get aid

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WESTFIELD - A \$14 million check is in the mail for Westfield Vocational High School's manufacturing technology program.

The "stimulus package" for new computers and software comes from the Society of Manufacturing Engineers Education Foundation, which works with the regional businesses and educators to engage more students in STEM education (science, technology, engineering, math) in Western Massachusetts.

A dozen local educators and community business leaders desperate for more skilled workers met last week at Tell Tool on Turnpike Industrial Road to discuss programs and funding sources to increase work force diversity and attract more students.

Bart A. Aslin, a member of the working group and director of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers Education Foundation, said the foundation will give Westfield Vocational High School \$14 million for software and an additional \$50,000 for new computers.

"It's a software from Siemens Corp. We hope to attract more students into manufacturing curriculum and careers," said Aslin, who flew in from Michigan for the session.

"Manufacturing is still strong (in Western Massachusetts), but there is a lack of qualified workers even here. We also hope to address a stereotype problem that young women don't belong in engineering or technology."

The first meeting on the group was held in April, said Larry Maier, president of Peerless Precision Inc., coordinator of the group.

"Now it's time to discuss some specific ideas that we can work on together and that (the foundation) can support us on, either through their network, or their funds," he said.

Regional career days, mobile training units and a summer camp for middle school students to give them a peek at careers in the world of STEM are among other ideas.

David M. Cruise, director of the Regional Employment Board, and Adrienne Smith, dean of School of Engineering Technologies at Springfield Technical Community College, "are working to see if they can find a middle school in Springfield that can be a 'gateway school' for that program," Maier said.

"We are planning to start in one area and then kind of spread it out," he said. "Bart (Aslin) said he really would like to see some projects that encourage either females or minorities in the school district, so that's why we are looking at Springfield for a kick-off."

There is "phenomenal shortage" of skilled labor in his high-precision sector, Maier said.

"We are the aerospace and defense industry. A lot of kids don't know about those careers. That's what driving us - a severe labor shortage. We are literally turn away business because we don't have enough people. We are also looking five to 10 years down the road and we've got to get the pipeline to feed it," he said.

Some 30 local companies, members of the National Tool and Machine Association, employing 1,800 people, have 97 openings, according to a recent survey.

"That's a 5.4 percent vacancy rate, which is higher than the state unemployment rate," Maier said.

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