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New tech wing ready for use

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CHICOPEE - On a break from installing equipment, Thomas Ferriter looked around the new Comprehensive High School and said he was in awe.

"This is going to be one of the nicest auto labs in the North East," said Ferriter, of Hampden, a distributor of technology education products who was readying equipment in the automotive laboratory for the start of school.

When students start class tomorrow, those in vocational courses, also called career technology, will be the first to enter the new \$93.5 million Comprehensive High School. The remaining students will have to wait until January to move across the driveway to the new building.

Construction is nearly complete, but the four-story academic wing is not ready.

Since the shops were finished first, it made sense to allow career technology students to move early so they would have an extra half-year to learn on state-of-the-art equipment, said Principal Stanley F. Kozikowski.

City officials last week signed a partial occupancy permit to open that one wing. Visits will be strictly curtailed so students and teachers can return to class uninterrupted, he said.

Career technology students will continue to attend academic classes in the old school and cross the driveway for vocational classes, he said.

In a short tour before school opened, Kozikowski showed off the new machinery and shops designed with a modern education in mind.

For years, teachers have complained outdated equipment leaves students' education lacking. They have had to rig many shops in the old school to prepare students for courses such as computer repair, and modern amenities such as having classrooms in the shops don't exist.

But in the new electronics shop, there is a separate room for cable wiring where a class can do a mock wiring of a smart house or a security system. Another room is for telecommunications systems, Kozikowski said.

The machine shop is furnished with rows and rows of new equipment students can use to learn how to mill parts by typing in computer codes. Several newer machines the school purchased over the years have also been moved to the shop.

"You can control this with computer, or you can override it and teach students the basics by doing it by hand," he said.

In auto technology, there are new engine simulators teachers can program with a problem students can fix. There is a large model of a car students can use to learn to replace brakes or fix steering. When the work is completed, a computer program will rule if the job was finished correctly, he said.

There are a lot of basic amenities that will make things easier for teachers.

Nearly all the shops - carpentry, welding, electronics, auto mechanics and machine technology - have outside access by garage doors. Many are also separated by wide doors so equipment can be moved from one shop to another, Kozikowski said.

The culinary arts department is no longer one big kitchen. Now there is a prep area, a cooking area and a separate kitchen for baking, he said.

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