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April 2009
S M T W T F S

Vocational Education investment sought

March 27th, 2009 · No Comments

By **DAN MORIARTY**
Staff Writer

WESTFIELD — In the midst of a recession when most companies are cutting back on staff, Western Massachusetts precision manufacturing companies are turning away work.

That was half of the message delivered by company owners and vocational educators Tuesday night to Greg Bialecki, state secretary of Housing and Economic Development.

Bialecki was in Westfield Tuesday night to attend a certificate presentation to “incumbent workers” who returned to night school to upgrade their job skills.

The other half of the message delivered to Bialecki, prior to the ceremony, was that the state needs to step up its support of vocational education, not just for the traditional high school students, but also for several groups of adults.

Those adults include people who have lost their jobs during the current financial crisis and who need to acquire new skills to get back into the workplace.

The other group of adult students include current employees of the precision manufacturing companies who need to upgrade their skills to remain competitive in a global industry that is being driven by leaps in technology.

The shop owners and educators said the state needs to invest in vocational education to replace outdated technology and equipment with that currently used in shops throughout the region.

Bialecki was also told that state education officials are fixated on post secondary education as a goal for high school students and do not appreciate the value of

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vocational skills that translate directly into employment opportunity.

Edward T. Leyden, president of the Western Massachusetts Tooling & Machining Association and owner of Ben Franklin Design & Manufacturing of Agawam, said that precision manufacturing graduates are getting “high quality jobs that pay \$50,000, \$60,000, even \$70,000 a year within five years of graduation.

“We’ve been turning work away because of the problem of getting qualified labor,” Leyden said.

The Westfield Vocational Technical High School precision manufacturing program is a model for other vocational schools to emulate, he said.

“This is state of the art,” Leyden said. “Students are coming out of this program with real life skills and don’t have to be reeducated after being hired.

Precision Manufacturing Director Clem Fucci said that he has “hit the lottery” because of efforts of U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst who secured a federal grant, and the support of manufacturing companies in greater Westfield which support the program with donations of cash and equipment, as well as providing internship for students.

“We have to start getting new technology into vocational technical schools across the region,” Fucci said. “This new technology also requires the kids to think differently.

“Thirty percent of all employment in the Westfield area is precision manufacturing, a lot of those positions are filled by our students,” he said.

Leyden said the state could see an increase of 100,000 precision manufacturing jobs as research and development efforts launched by the state in energy related and green technology evolve into products.

“This state is leading in R&D (research and development), so those jobs should stay in the state,” Leyden said.

“We need to stay at the forefront (of technology evolution) to keep those high quality jobs here in Massachusetts,” he said.

Larry Maier, president of Peerless Precision, Inc. of Westfield, said the precision manufacturing industry has done a poor job of promoting itself in terms of educational opportunity and careers.

“The problem, nationwide, is that there is a lack of skilled labor,” he said. “We need to show kids (in middle schools the potential of careers) in manufacturing. We need to position Massachusetts as a national leader.”

Buck Upson of Pioneer Tool Supply Inc., of West Springfield, said that outreach needs to extend past students, to parents who often shape educational decisions of their children.

“Get the kids hooked, fine, but then you have to sell it to the parents,” Upson said. “Shop owners are going to the (middle school) PTA groups to explain the opportunities available to their children in this career field, through vocational education.”

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Leyden said that many parents see manufacturing as a dead end career because of outsourcing of jobs overseas.

“They have a misconception that jobs, the big corporations, have gone overseas,” he said. “That is not the case in precision manufacturing where the big corporations have subbed out jobs to companies like us. So we’re playing catch up (to overcome that parental misperception).”

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