



New state law prioritizes technical training for skilled trades, creating pipeline of talent

By Colleen Jones

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These days, young people are “tracked” as early as middle school to get them primed for careers they’re interested in pursuing in the working world.

Much of the planning revolves around prerequisite courses that set students on the path for advanced coursework in that field and then a major at college.

With the state Legislature’s passage of a vocational and technical education bill, students who might not be destined for college — or just want to check out other options — will receive earlier and more prioritized exposure to skilled trades, computer science and other specialized training.

Vocational centers like Florida Coast Technical College applaud the measure.

“It’s really being strategic about a career path,” said FCTC President Chris Force.

So do employers like Centerline Brackets, a manufacturing plant in St. Augustine that is looking to expand its workforce over the next few years. They will need more young people who come in precertified in welding, fabrication and other skills.

“Having a local resource like FCTC where we can go [for potential employees] with a certain skill,” said Tracy Smith, co-owner of Centerline Brackets. “We’re local, and we want to hire local.”

The bill requires Florida schools to help students plan for careers even if they don’t want to seek a traditional post-secondary education. The new law will also require high school students to use computer science and other courses in place of advanced math and science courses to meet graduation requirements and expands apprenticeship programs. Lawmakers are rolling out the changes incrementally, having schools use 2019-20 as a transitional year, with full implementation by 2020-21.

Cody Cox graduated from FCTC in 2014 with a certification in structural steel, including advanced welding. Just months later, he was hired by Centerline Brackets. Now 24, Cox has worked for the company for more than four years.

“He’s been the best hire for our shop,” Smith said. “We wanted someone who would kind of grow with us, had all the skills and was willing to learn.”

Like Cox, Jordan Artau was practically hired on the spot when he applied for his first full-time job doing HVAC for Powell Heating & Air Conditioning in St. Augustine. When the 18-year-old finishes the program at FCTC in just a few weeks, he will start at \$14 an hour for Powell — not bad, Artau said, since he had maxed out at \$9 an hour working for a pizza shop.

Artau’s instructor at FCTC, Dane Dwyer, said, “We’re seeing that traditional education doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll find the salary you want. Plus, you may end up with student loans.”

The new career and technical education law also emphasizes more communication and partnerships between businesses and technical training centers to make sure the credentials students are earning align with employer demands and to fill in any workforce skill gaps.

FCTC is already doing this, for example, by offering a new electrical HVAC course in response to a number of service companies’ requests to bring current employees up to speed on new industry trends.

“For us, that opens up a whole new market,” Force said. “Every two years, we will do a needs assessment and that information helps us identify what’s missing [in skills] in the region, what’s needed.”

Cox said taking the job with Centerline Brackets was the best decision he could have made. He’s done so well with the company that he’s helped to train and mentor new hires, and he being groomed to take on even more responsibility.

In short, Cox has settled into a career that’s both fruitful and fulfilling.

“I think we really need to change our perception about vocational and trades skills,” Smith said.