

County High career unit open house planned; industries to visit

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Cj Maple, whose job is to help existing industries succeed and expand, had been hearing reports of something interesting at Henderson County High School.

It concerned the Career and Technical Education unit, or CTE -- what years ago was called the vocational school.

"I thought, maybe I should go" and tour the 33,000-square-foot facility, Maple, the manager of existing business for the Northwest Kentucky Forward economic development agency, said.

Afterward, "I was amazed," she said.

"I had no idea (of all) the classes offered in the CTE," Maple said. She imagined it teach auto mechanics, welding and carpentry.

What she found were programs in 13 career fields, from pre-engineering and accounting to health science and information technology -- oh, and automotive technology, welding, carpentry and other fields.

Right now, 1,208 of County High's 2,200 students have a major in one or more of those fields, taught by the CTE's 28 teachers.

During their freshman or sophomore years, all County High students take one CTE class -- Practical Living Vocational Studies. But about 1,400 students are taking other CTE classes as well.

Maple was impressed with "the polite and enthused happy people" she found studying at the CTE. "The more I walked, the more questions I asked and the more answers I got," Maple said. "I realized, what a wonderful thing this community has, and the community doesn't know about it."

She's resolved to change that by helping organize the County High Career and Technical Education unit's open house on the afternoon of Thursday, Jan. 29 that she hopes will draw 500 visitors.

The event will include an open house from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.; a drawing for door prizes at 4:30 p.m.; and a series of speakers including Deborah Anderson, the state's director of career and technical education as well as local public and school officials from 5 to 6 p.m.

It's going to be a show with multiple target audiences. Maple and CTE Principal Victor Doty want to show both County High students and eighth graders who will go to County High next fall how the CTE can prepare them for careers or college.

"It comes at the time of year when we're recruiting for next year," Doty said. "We would like to invite students in the building and in the eighth grade and the general public" to learn about how the CTE unit can prepare students for future careers.

They also want parents to come and see how it could benefit their children.

Also, Maple has recruited representatives of 20 local employers who will be available to talk with students and their parents about what kind of job skills they look for in an employee. She believes the exchange will help the students and the companies alike.

"Businesses always have the same complaint -- they can't find the right work force, they don't have basic math skills," Maple said. "I tell businesses, 'This is your chance. When you talk to the students and parents, tell them what the real world is like, that you have to show up every days and have these skills.'"

"This is not a job fair," she cautioned. "It's community awareness ... to let students know what may be available down the road for them" as well as to acquaint existing industries with the capabilities of the CTE.

One of the big career fields is health science, with some 300 students majoring in it.

Among them is senior Jordan Bjoralt, who is both a crack student (she's in both the National Honor Society and the National Technical Honor Society) and a crack shot (she placed sixth in the nation at the American Legion Air Rifle Championships in Colorado last August).

"After graduation, I plan to go to (the University of Southern Indiana) and study nursing, become a nurse practitioner," which is an advanced practice nurse with training and clinical practice beyond their registered nurse preparation, Bjoralt.

Most nurse practitioners have master's degrees; Bjoralt hopes to go beyond that and obtain a doctorate. In her CTE classes, she's learned about the human body and how to care for the ill. But Bjoralt has also spent time at Redbanks Nursing Home, logging clinical hours in preparation for taking the Medicaid nurse aid exam next month, which would be the first certification in her career. That will require learning more than 40 skills such as catheter care and how to safely transfer a patient from their bed to a wheelchair.

She also has been working in the dietary department of Methodist Hospital, and is preparing to begin CTE co-op work as a nutritional hostess, doing work such as keeping records of a patient's fluid intake. "I've always been interested in helping people," Bjoralt said. "I'm working with older people. It brightens their day. It's a great feeling."

At the CTE, she studies under RN's such as Amanda Lacer, who Bjoralt called "a well-qualified nurse who's always showing us hand-on" various techniques using medical mannequins in County High's health care lab. And working in real health care facilities now provides her an early look at what a career in nursing will entail.

Other majors offer other training. The pre-engineering program is pursuing certification through Project Lead the Way, a national program that strives to give middle and high school students a strong foundation in math, science and engineering. CTE's pre-engineering classes give students opportunities to do not just book studies, but to engage in projects such as designing, researching, constructing and testing a device that can sort marbles.

In machine tool classes, students learn how to program a computer-aided manufacturing machine to fabricate dice as well as to program a robot to automatically move and stack the dice. Some of the other CTE classes are academically rigorous as well. The construction geometry class, taught by County High math coordinator Beth Roberts, combines the abstraction of mathematics with practical applications such as calculating the rise and run of a staircase. The CTE geometry students on average outscore other geometry students in standardized tests, according to Doty.

"We have kids reading (technical materials) at college level (while) working on cars," he said. Some of the courses offered at the CTE can double as college credits that's transferrable to many universities, meaning that after entering college, students "will be able to start in the second or third course rather than start back at the beginning," Doty said.

And some CTE students are taken by bus to Henderson Community College to take college classes in areas such as advanced math.

Other students engage in hands-on learning, such as carpentry and construction juniors and seniors who are helping construct a Henderson Housing Authority house, or family and consumer science students who look after the children of teachers and students in the Colonels Daycare.

In one computer lab, students learn how to design web site using a software program called Dreamweaver. In another lab, visual communication students learn how to design a restaurant logo, menu and decor using the Adobe CS3 suite of Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign programs, instructor Kelly Burns said.

Accounting and finance students have opportunities to work in the Colonel Bank, while agriculture students raise plots of food crops as well as decorative plants such as poinsettias and ferns. "We have the valedictorian students (interested in learning leadership or public speaking through Future Farmers of America) as well as those students who are more hands-on," FFA adviser and ag instructor Dale Ayer said.

"The ultimate that we have to offer is training in specific occupational areas," Doty said. "I have students transitioning in their senior year to jobs such as at Methodist Hospital, such as at car dealerships."

Travis Goins was a stellar automotive student at County High in recent years who won a state Skills USA auto competition as a senior and, with a teammate, finished third in the Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills state competition as a junior.

But he also took advantage of CTE's opportunities for real-world experience. As a junior, Goins job-shadowed an auto technician at Kenny Kent Toyota in Evansville, then qualified for an internship at the dealership that summer. Through his senior year, he worked as a co-op student at Kenny Kent.

When he graduated, "They just asked me to stay," Goins said.

"I like it," he said of his work. "I'm not sitting down. I get to move around and use my hands. I'm a hands-on person."

He credits the CTE for teaching him skills. "It just really taught me a lot -- way more than I expected," Goins said.

Job opportunities exist in other fields as well.

"We have a contract with the millwright and carpenters (unions) where our top two kids go into the union (four-year apprenticeship program)," Doty said. "They'll make \$29 or \$30 an hour, counting benefits."

Tremendous opportunities exist for trained welders who have a firm grasp of the craft and are eager to work, according to CTE welding instructor Don Horvath.

"This is wide open," Horvath said.

"I told my senior class that after they graduate, if they don't have a job in one to two weeks, basically it's their fault," he said.

"I have some girls making \$27 an hour (in wages), and they graduated last year," Horvath said. Companies such as Titan Contracting and Leasing in Owensboro as well as various unions are vying for good, eager young welders who have a strong work ethic and understand a range of welding techniques. "They have to be versatile" and possess good math and communication skills, he said.

Bob Butler, the CTE's transition coordinator, has been at the school since 1989 and has witnessed the transformation of the old vocational school to today's CTE.

"Students have a whole lot more options as to a career path," Butler said. "It's better-focused and they have a better understanding of what it takes to be an engineer or auto technician or nurse. They're better-prepared."

Jeff Coursey, one of two school administrative managers at County High whose responsibilities include student behavior, said he finds fewer issues with students in the CTE than in other units of the school.

"We're not so much about discipline as to trying to change behavior," Coursey said. "They might be involved in their co-op and carpentry, and those are some privileges that can be taken away."

Further, Doty said, "CTE teachers are engaged with them for a four-year period and develop relationships with them. If their academic teachers see that a student is falling behind, our teacher can have a conference with Johnny and even give some of their class time" to allow the student to student to catch up on English or other academics.

That combination of career preparation, academics and student-staff relationships are what surprised and impressed Maple.

"It's way beyond -- even for people who were here 20 years ago -- way beyond" what the community realizes, Doty said.