

## The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

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### Addressing the gender divide in trades



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May 13, 2018 at 12:01 AM

Fifteen-year-old Rachel Blais consulted an oil-spattered diagram, then took a wrench to a steel elbow of pipe protruding from the wall.

“I originally came to Assabet for either cosmetology or health tech, but I didn’t really enjoy those shops,” Blais said, during her plumbing class at Marlborough’s Assabet Valley Regional Technical High School last week.

Plumbing is traditionally a heavily male-dominated trade, and the West Boylston teenager's choice to study it is a success of the technical and vocational schools' efforts to close a long-standing gender divide in many of the programs they teach.

"We do have some established goals .... for nontraditional enrollment in these programs," Joseph P. Keefe Technical High School Superintendent Jonathan Evans said, "and we do certainly try to encourage our students to have the information they need and the confidence and support to cross a gender line into an area that's of interest to them."

The divide still exists, mirroring trends in the career world. Construction-related programs are dominated by boys, while programs such as health technology, cosmetology and early childhood education lean heavily toward girls.

At Assabet, Blais is one of just seven girls in the school's plumbing program, and four in her own class. Getting boys into female-dominated programs is even more challenging, educators said.

"I think it's very difficult for young men this age to decide to do a job that is typically seen as a very feminine job," Assabet Health Technology Lead Instructor Kathy Regan said.

Technical and vocational schools in Milford and MetroWest are trying to override that gender bias. That means, among other approaches, that students learn more possible career paths after completing the high school programs than they used to. That helps students learn about options they might not have associated with a particular trade.

"Once you take that stigma away ... there's all kinds of opportunities," Blackstone Valley Tech vocation and career education data specialist Kimberly Elder said. "There's some great fields and great money."

Students also have a chance to explore a handful of trades before choosing one, spending meaningful time in different shops to override preconceptions of the work.

"I went into my week of automotive (classes) and I loved how hands-on and active it was, and how you didn't have to sit at a desk all day," said 16-year-old Keefe automotive technology student Aislinn Classey, adding her chosen path was the only male-dominated class she explored. "I just thought it would be a cool way to start a new tradition in my family."

Exposure to role models of the same gender as students is important, too, educators said.

Schools will bring in speakers or take field trips to see a non-traditional tradesperson at work.

"I think sometimes they wouldn't think of it as a possibility without actually observing it," Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School dental assisting team leader Colleen Langin said.

Then there are the clubs for non-traditional students, and regional organizations that host conferences and job fairs, particularly for women in male-dominated fields. Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School has a camp for middle school girls focused on STEM - science, technology, engineering and math - and it fills up quickly.

"We're seeing the evolution of what we're trying to do," Minuteman's Director of Career and Technical Education Michelle Roche said. "It just gives them a lot more self-confidence in what they're doing. Ultimately, that really is the goal. If they're going to feel good about it, they're going to stick with it."

Susan Moir, research director at the statewide Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues, sees a positive picture in the data. Her organization is part of a group aiming to have women make up 20 percent of tradespeople by 2020.

Though women in construction-based unions are around just 7.6 percent, she said, that number represents a tripling of women since the end of the recession. Technical schools are doing even better, at closer to 18 percent.

"When we say 20 percent by 2020, we are fairly sure that the (vocational technical) schools will be one of the first to reach that number," she said. "There is a substantial amount of girls in these programs, and they need the opportunity to move into well-paying jobs."

Students at MetroWest and Milford area technical schools last week said they appreciate the opportunity to help erase gender lines, particularly when working with younger students.

"Being in the field I'm in and showing people I'm successful in a female-dominated industry, it just excites me," said Blackstone Valley dental assisting student John Doiron. "I feel that I can show my freshmen who are boys they can succeed in a female-dominated industry."

Students said they want to be good role models, not just to prospective students, but to the greater community, too.

"Sometimes there are parents that aren't on board. (They say), 'Oh, it's not manly enough,' or 'It's not girly enough,'" Blais said. "They can see us up there and we're living proof their son or daughter can do it, too."

Instructors, meanwhile, focus on the skills students are learning, not their gender.

"The only time I really think about it is when it's brought up by someone who's not in my shop every day," Keefe Tech plumbing student Olivia Lilja, 16, said, the only girl in her class. "I don't think about it as being a strange thing."

That attitude might eventually make its way into real-world careers, students and instructors hope.

"I see it evolving. .... The norm wasn't men in nursing and it wasn't women in plumbing," 16-year-old Assabet health technology student Dante Urato said. "I think in today's day and age, things are really starting to evolve and change, and I hope it continues in that direction."

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### Enrollment Trends by School Year

A look at the gender divide at

and Secondary Education

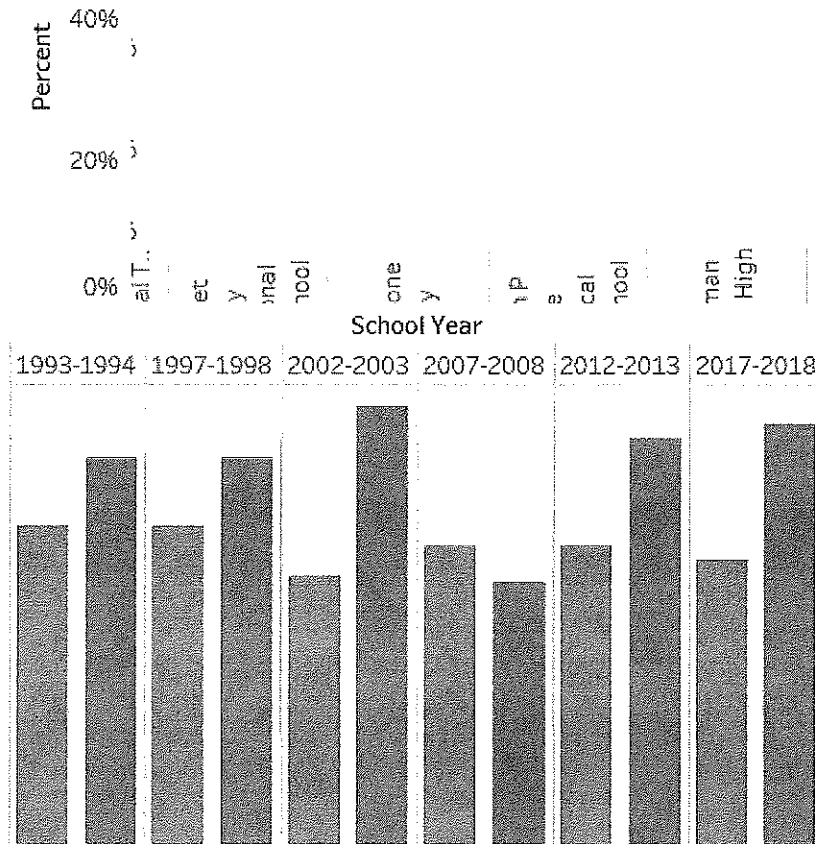
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Assabet Valley Vocational High School



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