



Thursday, September 22, 2022 Michael Moliterno

Skilled Trades Urge Teens to Become Apprentices

CANFIELD, Ohio — In three years, Margarete Schrock has gone from being recruited at the Mahoning Valley Skilled Trades Expo to doing the recruiting.

A second-year apprentice with Local 396 of the Plumbers & Pipefitters Union, Schrock was a senior taking welding classes at the Trumbull Career & Technical Center in 2019 when she attended the inaugural expo.

“As long as there’s work in this area, I would love to stay here,” Schrock says. “There’s a lot of work right now.”

Besides meeting and talking with local tradesmen at the expo, Schrock was also encouraged to enter the field by her brother, who works as a pipefitter.

“He showed me around and showed me all that he got to do to help create the world and I love it. It’s the best decision I’ve ever made,” she said.

The Plumbers & Pipefitters were one of 15 trades represented at the third annual Mahoning Valley Skilled Trades Expo, which took place Wednesday and Thursday at the Canfield Fairgrounds.





Over the two days, between 5,000 and 6,000 students from 55 districts in seven counties attended and got a better understanding of the skilled trades, Robert Eggleston says. He is coordinator for counseling at the Educational Service Center of Eastern Ohio.

In addition to the expo, Eggleston says the ESC, in partnership with the Builders Association of Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania and local trade unions, have begun to offer building trades career apprenticeship classes in 14 school districts across the Mahoning Valley.

“These classes prepare students to go into the trades,” he says. “They teach them everything from exploration to tool use, job site safety and so on.”

The program was launched last year with 350 students, 50 of whom declared they would go into a trade after graduation, Eggleston says: “This year that number is sitting between 450 and 500 and we’re expecting 50 to 75 students to declare to go into a building trade after they graduate.”

By the end of next year, Eggleston says, the building trades hope to add two or three more schools to the program. The exact number will depend on the amount of grant funding they receive, because most of the schools fund the programs themselves. “And that’s awesome to see their enthusiasm for it and a lot of that stems from this event,” he says.

Most of the trades represented at the expo reported a need for more workers and those that didn’t said they soon will once projects such as the new St. Joseph Hospital Mercy Health plans to build in Champion ramps up.





“We’ll need 100 to 150 guys just for that one project, for probably three years,” says Rick Boyarko, training director with Local 396 of the Mercy project. “There’s a lot of work on the horizon, not just for us, for all the trades.”

There’s been so much work for the past few years, Boyarko says, they’ve needed 100 to 200 workers from outside the district to come to the Mahoning Valley to help with projects. “We don’t have enough people to man the work,” he says.

The Plumbers have 77 apprentices enrolled in its program, up from about 59 five years ago, which he attributes to events like the expo. “We have a lot more apply than get in because we can only take so many. We can only handle so many at one time,” he says.

Jim Taylor, business representative for the Painters Local 476, said the 30 apprentices the union has enrolled is increase over the past few years,

although he'd like to have 50 going through the four-year program at any given time. "If we had 30 or even 20 in every year, that would be fine. That would give us 80 apprentices," Taylor says.

Nancy Weibel, business manager for Roofers Local 71, said she'd like to double the number of apprentices she currently has to 50. "Everybody is building and we are hiring all the time," she says.



Nancy Weibel, business manager for Roofers Local 71

While big projects are placing increased demand on the skilled trades to recruit workers, the industry is also beginning to feel the effects of attrition from an ageing workforce, says Gary Hartman, association services director with the Builders Association.

"We're in such a deficit that it's going to take a while for us to get built back up," he says.

Most tradesmen in the area are in their mid-40s and many will be leaving the workforce in the next five to 10 years, Hartman says.

During the next hiring cycle, he says, the Builders hope to bring on 500 new apprentices across all the trades. "That's a lot," he says. "That's a lot of jobs."

To help fill them, the trades also opened the expo to the general public, who could come and meet the workers, do pre-interviews and fill out applications. "People that are looking for jobs right now. We can get them in," Hartman says.

Brain Wydick, business representative for Local 66 of the Operating Engineers union, was one of the few to report his local was near peak employment, although he said his union needs to find 150 more operators over the next year to tackle the extra projects. "It's going to be a challenge," he says.

Still, Wydick recalled meeting a similarly daunting challenge in 2016 when Royal Dutch Shell announced plans to build a \$6 billion ethane cracker plant near Monaca in western Pennsylvania. "That was a challenge for our local but we met that challenge and we'll meet this one," Wydick says.

One of those who could be there to help Wydick's cause is Dylan Hovanec, a sophomore at Jackson-Milton High School.

Hovanec looks to enter the ministry after graduation, he says, but his second choice would be a career in the trades: "I like to work with my hands. I like to make stuff."

His classmate Zack Armstrong wants to attend a trade school to become a motorcycle mechanic when he graduates in the spring. "It wouldn't really feel like work for me to do that everyday," he says.

Armstrong said he would also consider working as an auto mechanic to learn how to fix the new electric vehicle engines. "The main thing for me is enjoying what I do. I don't want to dread going to work every day," he says.

Shawn Shaffer, a freshman at Sebring McKinley High School, says he wants to stay in the area and be close to family. After graduation he plans to pursue a career as a welder. "I heard there are opportunities that come with it," he says.

Julia Long, a sophomore at Lisbon David Anderson High School, plans to go to law school after she graduates from college but allows she also sees the appeal of working in the skilled trades. "I'm a pretty artistic person so I think I could be interested in it," she says.

What she is most sure of is that she wants to leave the area after high school. "I just need to get out of the bubble and go somewhere else," she says.

While the lack of workers here and across the country is too big a problem to be addressed by any one event or program, Hartman says, they are all part of a bigger push beginning to gain traction: "It's all taking those steps that hopefully pan out for the future. We're investing in three, four and five years down the road."

Pictured at top: Left to right: Logan Makepeace, 4th Year Apprentice Local 66; Dylan Bregar, Sophomore, Jackson Milton High School; Shawn Shaffer, Freshman, Jackson Milton High School.

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