

Washington Business



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IN THEIR WORDS

New Commerce Director Mike Fong

Education on the Job

High school students get an advance start on life — and a rich expansion of their public school education — through youth apprenticeship programs.

BRIAN MITTGE

Students are earning paychecks, college credits, on-the-job training hours, journey-level certification, and a diploma, all while still attending high school classes and activities. Employers are preparing the next generation of skilled talent to enter the workforce. For a growing cohort of high school students, the Elma School District and businesses like Sierra Pacific Industries, it's a win-win-win.

At A Glance

Employers are struggling to find skilled workers. At the same time, high schools want their students to learn real-life skills that will help them get great jobs or be better prepared for post-secondary education. Youth apprenticeship programs are a solution for both needs.

AJAC is a state-funded nonprofit organization that offers no-cost support for employers and schools as they explore and implement registered apprenticeships.

The youth apprenticeship program at the Elma School District involves high schoolers working full-time during the summer before their senior year, then working four hours during the school year and attending classes, then another full-time summer after graduation. The work is paid and college classes are also part of the program.

AJAC:
www.ajactraining.org/programs/youth

Sierra Pacific Industries:
www.spi-ind.com



Shawn Dotson, the Sierra Pacific Industries Shelton mill manager (left), and Corey Harris, the Shelton fabrication shop superintendent (right), listen to four of the Elma High School apprentices at Sierra Pacific talk to visiting teachers in August: Isaac Phillips (an Elma High School senior and first-year apprentice); Brandon Orcutt (a second-year apprentice/SPI maintenance employee); Kaleb Anderson (a second-year apprentice/SPI maintenance employee); and Chase Allee (an Elma High School senior and first-year apprentice).

SHELTON — For a few hardworking Elma High School students, school is in session in more ways than one.

A handful of students spent the summer learning while working in the fabrication shop at the Sierra Pacific Industries mill in Shelton, where they gained proficiency with the welder, grinder, plasma cutter and other equipment thanks to ongoing on-the-job-guidance from the experienced workers in the shop.

As registered youth apprentices, they are earning good wages from SPI, college credits, and hours toward a journey-level certificate that will give them a world of options along with their high school diplomas.

This enthusiastic cohort of Elma apprentices would wake up at 4 a.m. during the summer months, carpool to Shelton, work eight hours, then head back home for football practice and other normal teenage activities.

"We're here to guide and direct people. We give them experiences to make a choice. Hopefully we retain a few along the way."

— DARRIN MOORCROFT, WASHINGTON AREA MANAGER FOR SIERRA PACIFIC INDUSTRIES

During the school year, the youth apprentices work four hours at SPI, then go to classes in the afternoon.

'IT'S A GREAT OPPORTUNITY'

The SPI apprenticeship program with Elma High School kicked off in the summer of 2022 with three students who worked full-time (as paid employees) throughout the summer before entering their senior year. After graduating they go back to SPI full-time to finish out their 2,000 hours for the youth apprenticeship program and earn a nationally recognized journey-level certification.

Brandon Orcutt was part of that first cohort. After a year as both a high school student and SPI employee, he graduated from Elma High School in 2023.

His favorite part of his apprenticeship was being asked to design a guard for saws used by the mill. He measured up the space, drew up a design in CAD, cut out the metal pieces, welded them together, installed them in place, and then had the satisfaction of seeing his work being used every day, keeping his co-workers safe.

"I love it," he said. "I love the high school aspect that I'm not there the whole time. I learned so much more than I ever could have without it. It's a great opportunity. They start off slow so you can learn a lot about it before they push you to build things."

Kaleb Anderson, another apprentice, agrees. Not only is it fun to learn, design and build, but unlike his role as a student, he gets a paycheck.

"During school it was nice having a regular income... having adult money in high school," Anderson said with a smile. (Both Orcutt and Anderson bought cars with their SPI paycheck while apprentices.)

EXPANDING SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES

CJ Johnson, HR for Sierra Pacific Industries, said the teenaged students have quickly gotten up to speed. They manage projects and contribute to the fabrication team's productivity.

"Brandon jumped right into CAD," she said. "Kaleb could be a millwright trainee if I needed to hire one tomorrow."

At the end of the program the students will come out with a journeyman credential. That can give them a leg up to get work or they can use that to get into an adult apprenticeship. Sierra Pacific sees their contribution to the program as helping add to the pool of qualified, well-trained workers to fill the ranks of open jobs in



LEARN MORE ABOUT APPRENTICESHIPS

Employers or school districts who are interested in starting or taking part in apprenticeship programs can contact AJAC at info@ajactraining.org.

Aaron Ferrell, director of marketing and communications for AJAC, said the pieces are already in place for these types of programs to happen on shop floors across the state. It's an important piece of the workforce puzzle as experienced workers retire.

"A lot of them are overlooking young adults," he said. "We hear again and again, 'I'm looking for talent' and this is a really easy way to give back to the community."

Many employers find that the month or two it takes to get a teenager up to speed is more than made up for by the reliability and enthusiasm they bring to the job. And the older employees on the shop floor are often reinvigorated by the opportunity to pass on what they've learned to eager young apprentices.

"It breathes new life into the company," Ferrell said.

The employer's job is to identify people at the company who can mentor the students. AJAC, which receives state funding to enhance Washington's workforce, can then help train these mentors at no cost.

"Honestly, it can happen pretty fast," Ferrell said. "There's not a lot of strings attached."

manufacturing and production facilities. And, of course, the company is thrilled if a few of them decide to stay on at the company, too.

Darrin Moorcroft, Washington area manager for Sierra Pacific Industries, said the goal is to give kids options and pathways. Some will choose to go on to college, others may want to pursue more training or further time to grow on the job.

"We're here to guide and direct people. We give them experiences to make a choice," Moorcroft said. "Hopefully we retain a few along the way."

AJAC (Advanced Manufacturing Apprenticeships), a statewide apprenticeship program, helps guide employers like SPI and help them make the program a success both for the businesses and for the students. They have worked with the Department of Labor & Industries on safety and regulatory frameworks for students as young as 16.

The would-be apprentices need to sell themselves to the employer during a regular job interview.

"They all have to be officially hired as an employee," said Aaron Ferrell, director of marketing and communications for AJAC, the recipient of AWB's 2019 Washington Achieve Award. "That's a really unique facet. I think we call it speed dating... The businesses get to interview and select the folks they want to hire. It works itself out from there."

WORKFORCE READINESS BEGINS EARLY

Ferrell noted that while youth apprenticeship programs are popping up around the state, Elma is a leader under superintendent Chris Nesmith.

"It's really inspiring," Ferrell said. "We have youth apprenticeships all over the place, but there's something different happening in Elma. It's a really small town doing really big things."

The Elma School District sees workforce readiness as a project that begins in kindergarten, not just high school. As part of preparing for the new school year, two dozen educators took a tour of SPI's dual line stud mill in Shelton in August.

"It's phenomenal," said Sarah Hampton, an Elma Elementary School guidance counselor, who stopped frequently to take photos and videos of the SPI mill.

Mill operators explained the high-tech process of scanning each log, analyzing it and applying specific cuts to maximize production based on each tree's unique growth. As a mill operator explained how saws can cut along a curved log to produce a straight board, teachers nodded in understanding.

"That's a whole lot of STEM in action," said Christi Kershaw, CTE Director for the Elma School District.



"I love it. I love the high school aspect that I'm not there the whole time. I learned so much more than I ever could have without it. It's a great opportunity. They start off slow so you can learn a lot about it before they push you to build things."

— BRANDON ORCUTT, WHO GRADUATED FROM ELMA HIGH SCHOOL IN 2023 AFTER A YEAR IN THE YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Along with Sierra Pacific Industries, Elma has placed apprentices with other employers, including the Vaughan Company and A&R Aviation.

Teachers say the apprenticeship students come back to their classes with life experiences and an enthusiasm for learning that energizes their high school classrooms.

Kerry Murphy, who teaches civics, U.S. history and economics at Elma High School, said the apprenticeship students are leading discussions on once-abstract topics through their practical knowledge of government rules like workplace safety protocols, transportation and water emissions rules. What she has to explain to the other students, these apprentices already get.

"They really understand that because they see it at work," she said. "It gives them a point of reference that other kids might not have... It affects them. They have a frame of reference."

Kim Hinderlie, an eighth-grade English teacher in Elma, said she's going to encourage her students to look into apprenticeships.

"It's a good thing," she said. "We need to get the mindset that you don't always have to go to college to make a good living." 