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### Ohio dealer, local school district revamp shuttered buildings to train next generation of automotive technicians

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Preston Superstore Master Technician Mike Potyonek helps Berkshire High School student Ethan Hill remove brakes from a Ford F-150. (PRESTON SUPERSTORE)

AW By **Alysha Webb**

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John Stoddard, superintendent of Berkshire Local Schools, was walking a former Ohio Department of Transportation site adjacent to the district’s high school in Burton, Ohio, in September 2024. The district had an option to acquire the five-acre location and Stoddard was discussing it with a DOT employee.

The site was ideal for expanding the schools’ automotive technician training program, but remodeling the buildings was too expensive. Pat Preston, owner of the nearby Preston Superstore dealerships, noticed Stoddard walking the site.

“Pat said, ‘Hey, what’s going on over here?’” Stoddard said. “I told him and that’s when he said, ‘OK, how about we work together?’ So, that’s kind of how it all started.”



"It's not only real-world experiences for our students, but real opportunities to enter the workforce and to start a career where they'll earn a living wage, have opportunities for advancement and they'll have access to high-quality health care benefits," John Stoddard, superintendent of Berkshire Local Schools, said of the project. (BERKSHIRE LOCAL SCHOOLS)

career horizons, Stoddard said.

Preston Superstore and the school district are partnering to create an expanded automotive technician training program for Berkshire High School.

Preston donated \$750,000 to purchase the site and has said he planned to invest about \$1 million in renovation costs.

Additionally, Berkshire schools received a \$915,000 community investment grant from the state.

## The American dream

By investing in the project, the Preston group will have access to a steady supply of service technicians. Just as importantly, the students will have expanded



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"It's not only real-world experiences for our students, but real opportunities to enter the workforce and to start a career where they'll earn a living wage, have opportunities for advancement and they'll have access to high-quality health care benefits," he said. "Essentially, it's the American dream for our kids."

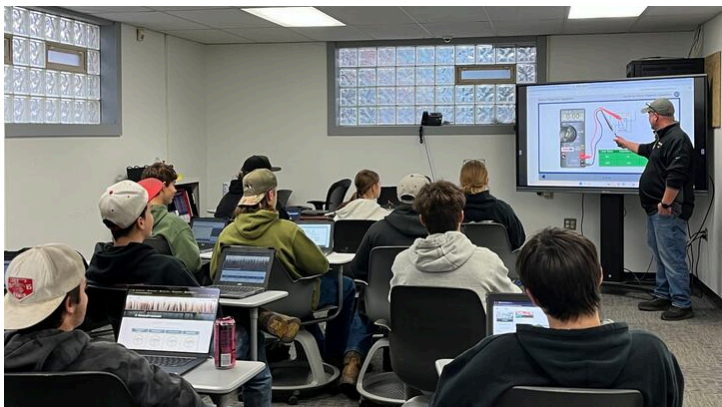
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Preston Superstore in Burton has [Kia](#), [Chevrolet](#) and [Ford](#) franchises clustered in an area close to the former DOT site. It also has a Ford commercial vehicle franchise.

The dealerships employ more than 60 [service technicians](#), about 15 service advisers and three service managers, said Neal Shirk, fixed ops director at Preston Superstore. The group's business development center makes about 3,200 monthly service appointments, he said.

When Shirk was asked by Preston to lead the group's work with Berkshire Schools, he initially was reluctant. But then he considered the impact the program could have on students' lives.

"I want to develop great technicians for Preston, and I want these kids to have a chance to go out and be successful," he said.



Preston Superstore Master Technician Mike Potyonek teaches Berkshire High School automotive technician students about the fundamentals of a vehicle's electrical system. (PRESTON SUPERSTORE)

Shirk embraced the program and made it his own. "As soon as I got involved, we took it up a notch," he said.

Shirk oversaw the revision of the technician training curriculum, which previously focused on diesel engine repair. Students now learn how to also work on internal combustion engine and electric vehicles.

### **Learning from a master technician**

The program includes both classroom and hands-on experience. The first-year curriculum is based on the Ford Automotive Career Exploration program, Stoddard said.

Students who choose to stay in the program for a second year can opt to take the diesel repair pathway. Others will continue to follow the ACE program, he said, though they won't be limited to working at a Ford dealership.

Mike Potyonek, a master technician at Preston Chevrolet, teaches the classes. Stoddard said that's a huge benefit because Potyonek knows which of the Preston dealerships is doing the work the students are learning about.

"Our kids don't have to tear down and rebuild nonfunctioning engines to learn how to work on them," Stoddard said. "They can actually go to a live job and see it happening."

As part of the course, students are assigned to shadow a technician at one of the Preston dealerships or the commercial garage, all within walking distance from the school. It's essentially an internship with a technician, Stoddard said.

### **From semis to pickups**



Berkshire High School senior Logan Jackson is considering a career as an automotive technician. (PRESTON SUPERSTORE)

Jackson said.

He hasn't ruled out working at a dealership, however.

"If a tech came up to me and was going to leave and I could take his spot, I would do it," Jackson said.

Another senior, Nick Ksiazka, 18, already is working as a diesel mechanic on semitrucks at a trucking company. He also is learning how to work on pickups through the Preston/Berkshire program.

"They're different from semis because pickups have a different suspension from semis and semis have air brakes [while] pickups have just normal brakes," he said.



Berkshire High School senior Nick Ksiazka already works part time as a diesel mechanic and wants to be a technician after he graduates. (PRESTON SUPERSTORE)

Classes in the revamped mechanical technician program started in September. It is one of many Berkshire Workforce Development initiatives the school offers.

Senior Logan Jackson, 18, said he has already learned how to pull a gasoline motor and a transmission, and some diagnostics.

He's not sure if he will pursue a service technician career; he may become a dirt excavator operator. But the class appealed to him because "I am really into cars and I thought when my car breaks, I could fix it,"

Ksiazka said he "definitely" plans a career as a technician.

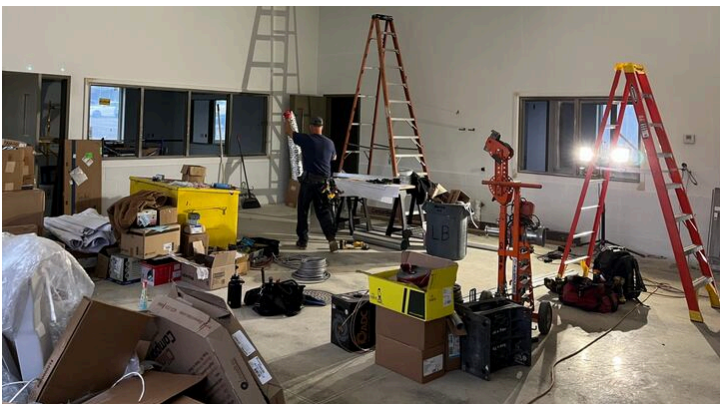
### An opportunity for all

Renovation is almost complete on the former DOT site, which contained five buildings. All were renovated except for one that was torn down. It was replaced with a structure with two classrooms and several garage bays as well as administrative space.

All of the buildings are scheduled to be open soon; classes have been conducted online and at the high school. The first cohort of 32 students is divided into morning and afternoon groups.

The program could potentially accommodate up to 130 students, Stoddard said. Preston Superstore has enough technicians to offer hands-on training as the numbers grow, he said

"It's a win-win because it's given us an avenue for our kids to go, and it's given Preston a pipeline for future employees," Stoddard said.



A new building on the site of a former Ohio Department of Transportation complex will soon be the site of automotive technician training classes. (PRESTON SUPERSTORE)

Preston Superstore said it will hire any program graduate who wants a job, according to Vanessa Povozahev, director of professional learning and community outreach at Berkshire Local Schools. If it turns out the service department isn't a good fit, they can try marketing, sales or another area, she said.

"I think that's really an opportunity for all of our students," Povozahev said,



Preston Superstore is offering jobs to all students in the program, said Vanessa Povozahev, director of professional learning and community outreach at Berkshire Local Schools. (BERKSHIRE LOCAL SCHOOLS)

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