

Dig this career option Thurston's trade skills class learns to operate heavy machinery

By Anne Williams

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SPRINGFIELD — After spending the better part of Wednesday morning at the controls of an excavator, then a backhoe, Thurston High School senior Mikey Manfrass was ready to sign up on the spot for an apprenticeship as a heavy-equipment operator.

College, he said, is not his goal.

“I’d rather do that the rest of my life,” Manfrass said, pointing to the excavator parked behind him. “I enjoyed it — thoroughly.”

Classmate Alyssa McClatchey, also a senior, wasn’t so sure.

“It was hard — I think it would take a lot of time and a lot of practice,” said McClatchey, who plans to attend Lane Community College for at least a year while she figures out what career she’s interested in.

The two were among 19 Thurston students who visited the Operating Engineers Local 701 Training Facility in Glenwood on Wednesday to get a feel for an industry that anticipates a shortage of skilled workers as many journeyman equipment operators near retirement.

The students are enrolled in a new class called Trade Skills Fundamentals, where they’re learning skills meant to prepare them for careers in construction and manufacturing — and earning college credit.

Among topics they’ve covered so far are safety, blueprint reading, power tools and hand tools, teacher Joanne Kuhnlein said.

During the visit to the training facility — their second field trip — the students also tested their skills on a computer program, Simlog, that simulates heavy-equipment operations.

Lacy Byrne, a junior and one of three girls in the class, attempted several functions, including truck loading and crane lifting. The latter proved frustrating — the program kept timing out before she had a chance to lower the load to the targeted spot, yet when she moved it too quickly the load rocked.

But after a little practice, she seemed close to mastering the truck loading, scooping up virtual dirt in an excavator bucket and dumping it into a truck bed with almost no errors.

“You’re very good — most people would be scraping the teeth on the side there,” Gene Kidd, a field representative for Local 701, told her.

Byrne, whose mother cleans heavy equipment, said she signed up for the class because she’ll need training in the construction trade to prepare for her chosen career as an architect.

To try the real thing, students rode a bus out to an old rock quarry that Local 701 leases for training purposes.

As for most of the students, the experience was a first for senior Sean Spencer, who has loved being outside and building things since he was a toddler.

Learning to operate the machinery was harder than learning to drive a car, he said, because of all the different joysticks and pedals and functions, but easier than he’d expected.

He said he’s glad Thurston kept its relatively strong vocational/technical skills classes while many other schools have pared back.

“I probably wouldn’t have known what I’d be doing after high school,” said Spencer, who also is attracted by the pay in the construction industry — about \$32 an hour for the average heavy-equipment operator, or about \$60,000 per year.

Thurston is one of three Oregon schools receiving technical and grant support — \$25,000, in Thurston’s case — from the Bureau of Labor and Industries to support high school apprenticeship preparation programs. The new class is a partnership between local apprenticeship training committees, industry professionals, LCC, Thurston and BOLI.

The students also met briefly with Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, who believes too many schools have abandoned their responsibility over the past decade to help prepare students for these well-paying, critically important jobs.

“It’s a crisis, both in terms of the development of our kids and in how Oregon prepares a work force that sustains its economy,” said Avakian, who sees apprenticeship preparation programs as a key part of his work force development agenda. He is seeking a full four-year term to his office in next month’s election.

Tom Thompson, an education specialist for industrial and engineering systems with the state Department of Education, said the trend has started to reverse itself, partly because there’s been more funding from the state but also because schools recognize the need for career/technical education.

“We’re beginning to hear from schools that they’re looking carefully at career and technical education programs as being a real viable option, to not only help move students into careers but also to prepare them for post-secondary education,” Thompson said.

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KEVIN CLARK/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Operating Engineers Training Facilities apprentice Ray Daniels teaches Thurston High student Alyssa McClatchey to operate a backhoe.



KEVIN CLARK/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Gene Kidd watches Thurston student Lacy Byrne operate a heavy machinery simulator. "You're very good," Kidd said. "Most people would be scraping the teeth on the side there."



KEVIN CLARK/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Thurstson High students don orange vests and hard hats before operating heavy equipment at the Operating Engineers Local 701 Training Facility in Glenwood on Wednesday as part of the high school's Trade Skills Fundamentals class.