

High School Apprenticeship Program at BPSD

The province of Manitoba has made it mandatory that all students will stay in school until either they graduate, or reach the age of 18. It's an effort to send the students out into the workplace or on to further education with a greater level of skills, and it's not a bad idea. The trouble is that the ones affected by this change in the legislation are the ones who would otherwise have left school as soon as it became possible, and these are young people who are already having issues with the way schooling is done. It is going to be a real challenge to keep them engaged for another two years.

The challenge isn't new to the staff at Beautiful Plains. There is plenty in place for the students who already enjoy the existing learning process, but the process doesn't fit all styles of learning; it particularly bypasses those whose best uptake comes from direct, hands-on practice, rather than theory – people whose memory is stimulated by action and feel rather than by verbal "classroom" concepts.

More and more, strategies are being developed that engage more than just the verbal memory to instruct. Computer simulations are helping people to learn in a way that requires less keyboarding and more 'feel.' But it's still true that for many good learners, the only way to learn – particularly a trade – is by being shown, in person, by someone skilled. This is the basis of the apprenticeship program that is the mandated entry point of a number of valued and rewarding trades.

The province has recognized the value of starting this learning method early, and has enabled students to amass up to 8 of their needed high school credits through apprenticing with a qualified journeyman. This doesn't mean that basic math, language and computer skills can be skipped; almost all trades require these skills at a grade 12 level. With the incentive of the workplace, though, it is easier to get motivated.

It's not as easy to set up as all that. The trainer must be willing, insured and certified; wages must be paid. The apprentice must have a schedule that allows him or her to take all the required essential skills courses at school. There are reports to be done, and time sheets to be maintained. The employer must help the school assess the student's progress. Both the employer and the school division have duties. Tax incentives, safety regulations, assessment policies and insurance requirements have to be applied.

It will need someone special to attend to all the details, and "get the ducks in a line," and fortunately we have someone on the job who can do just that. He's Bob Lepischak, and until the end of this school year, he was enjoying his 43rd year of teaching at NACI. The job of apprenticeship coordinator, which is nominally a half time position, is supposed to be his gentle easing into retirement, but that's not how Bob likes to do things. He's already matchmaking students and employers, and is giving out his cell number to hear from students, parents or employers who want to get the process under way sooner. Hours worked as an apprentice during the summer holidays can be applied towards academic credits at graduation, so there's reason enough to get the paperwork in place quickly.

Bob feels that the first important contact should be between the student and the employer. This is after all a venture for both that is hoped to develop into a good mutual relationship. "We want it to be a positive experience for both student and employer," Bob says. The employer stands to gain a motivated local employee

who may find in the trade a way to stay in his home community. The student will be paid to take up to eight of his high school credits, and can go on to fast track into a lifetime career. The employer can earn tax credits, the apprentice can receive incentive grants if (s)he continues after graduation.

More than 40 trades are eligible for the high school apprenticeship program, from machinists, plumbers and electricians to painters, hairstylists and cooks. In all but the designated compulsory trades, a knowledgeable person with enough years of work experience can apply to be the designated trainer, even if they are not a registered journeyman.

If you have questions (and there can be many) Bob Lepischak can be reached through the BPSD office at 476-2387 or on his cell at 841-5444 and he will try and get you some answers. "I'm very new to this" he says, "but it's really exciting. Students in the apprenticeship program mature in a different way – more world-oriented; it rounds them off as a person." Beautiful Plains School Division is excited about the possibilities, too.