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Cedarburg machine shop donates CNC, hires tech-ed students, alumni

The partnership between Carlson Tool in Cedarburg and Cedar Grove-Belgium High School continues to grow as company officials provide equipment, tools and expertise to the school's technical-education program.

In return, the company hopes to gain skilled employees for its machine shop and for other manufacturers.

The most noticeable donation is a $60,000 CNC machine that sits in the new tech-ed center. The equipment is almost identical to the one Carlson uses to train its employees, who frequently are Cedar Grove-Belgium graduates or cooperative education students.

Ron Klas, an Ozaukee High School graduate who started working for the company when he graduated in 1984 and is now plant manager, gave an overview of his company and the way it's working with the district to the School Board on July 11.

"A lot of schools were dropping their technical education classes. We were looking to get involved at the high-school level to give opportunities to students who aren't going to be going to college," Klas said.

That doesn't mean the company doesn't value higher education. The company sends its employees to schools, Klas said.

As he showed pictures of the company, Cedar Grove-Belgium alumni or students were often pictured.

He had high praise for cooperative student Chris Peterson, who left the company after working there nine months to attend Lakeshore Technical College and is now at the University of Wisconsin-Stout studying to be a technical-education teacher.

Grant Santarius, who joined the company as a cooperative student his senior year, wants to study architectural design and continue working at Carlson.

Adam Koepsell also joined the firm last year and Austin Buehlow, who wasn't a tech-ed student, signed on in November 2011. Dillan Koch started working at the company in June.

Klas showed a picture of Alex TenHaken, 18, operating a $750,000 machine. TenHaken, he said, has a gift for running the sophisticated equipment.

“One thing about Cedar Grove-Belgium students is they are very reliable. They’re always at work and don’t call in sick,” Klas said.

After the first year or two that co-op students were at Carlson Tool, technical-education teacher Fred Nicora said he and Klas realized student-workers needed strong math skills. So tech-ed students are now encouraged to take algebra, geometry and trigonometry, something that hadn’t been emphasized before.

“All of a sudden, we have kids who see that math is really important,” Nicora said.

Although current students and grads who work at Carlson are males, Nicora said, he expects to see girls vying for those spots now that basic technical-education classes are taught in the middle school.

“Some of the girls are realizing this is something they can do and earn a good wage,” Nicora said. “We’re putting students in jobs that could lead to very good salaries.”

He recommended the district implement a youth apprentice program because students who are under age 18 cannot use some of the machines at Carlson Tool.

An apprentice program would be available to younger students, who don’t operate the machines but learn about them by working alongside Carlson machinists, Klas said.

Currently, students are eligible for coop programs the second semester of their senior year.

Carlson works around students’ schedules so they can participate in sports and other extracurricular activities, Nicora said.

Nicora said he talked with Fox Valley Tool and Die Co. in Kaukauna, which works with a number of school districts in its apprentice program that starts in the sophomore year. Students can work part-time at the company beginning their junior year.

“It might be something we want to look at,” Nicora said. “Now, we’re restricted to senior year.”

Nicora and fellow tech-ed teacher Curtis Teunissen are being trained on the school’s CNC machine by Carlson employees, so they in turn can teach students.

“It’s a lot trickier than I thought it would be,” Nicora said. “The training we’re receiving is excellent. With the machine, we will be able to take (student) projects from design to manufacturing.”

Klas noted that not only technical-education students, but also other students have joined Carlson Tool.

“Alex wore his Carlson Tool shirt to school everyday and he got other kids really excited about us,” Klas said.

In addition to the CNC machine, Carlson Tool provided gauges, measurement tools and other equipment to the school.

“We feel very fortunate that you guys chose us to partner with,” School Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger told Klas. “We really appreciate that.”

The tech-ed department is working with Lakeshore Technical College in Cleveland to obtain a Perkins grant for Cedar Grove-Belgium programs and to develop LTC certification classes for students and adults.

Perkins grants are also available for youth apprentice programs.

“Because of people like Carlson Tool and because of what the School Board and the community, including M&R Motors (of Cedar Grove which donated a vehicle lift) have done, we have a great facility and everybody realizes that,” Nicora said.

“Not only is it good for our students, but other school districts are looking at us. We could become a regional tech-ed program.”

Image Information: LEARNING TO USE the CNC machine donated by Carlson Tool Co. to the Cedar Grove-Belgium High School were (from left) technical education teachers Curtis Teunissen and Fred Nicora. Todd Freeman, a manufacturing engineer with Carlson Tool, is their instructor. Photo by Sam Arendt