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Students take classes head (and hands) on

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Laura Thompson
Staff Reporter

"This isn't your daddy's shop class," Greg Taylor said standing in his basement woodworking lab at Mount Airy High School.

The lab is empty. His students have gone to lunch. But minutes ago, power saws and machinery whined over a backdrop of country music as Taylor's Furniture and Cabinetmaking II class worked to finish their projects.

It's still a shop. Partially assembled bookshelves and cabinets rest on tables and on the floor. But students also are learning some technology that's on the cutting edge of industry in North Carolina.

This is the challenge of career and technical education - teaching the fundamentals while also preparing students for careers that will integrate skills and knowledge from a wide range of disciplines.

"There's so much to this ball game nowadays," said Larry Davis, director of career and technical education (CTE) for Mount Airy City Schools.

In his 30 years with the school system - half as a teacher and half as CTE director - Davis has seen changes not only in the courses offered in CTE programs, but also in the students who take them.

It used to be that students planning to go to a four-year college didn't spend much time in CTE classes. Even now, Davis said, Advanced Placement and honors courses draw many students away from subjects such as allied health or family and consumer science.

The state Department of Public Instruction doesn't require CTE for students following a college-prep curriculum. Mount Airy High School requires everyone to complete at least four classes in CTE or the arts to graduate. Why such an emphasis?

Davis asks, why not?

"Any occupation that you do involves some type of computer skills," he said. Part of MAHS' requirement for students in CTE programs is to take Computer Applications. "Why would you not want to take that?"

A student may not show much interest in parenting or consumer science courses in high school, but Davis points out that most will need to draw on skills taught in those classes at some point in their lives. And even if they're not planning a career in construction, students come out of Construction Tech classes with skills that could be turned into a rewarding hobby.

Some CTE classes force students to take what they've learned from core curriculum courses like math and even English and apply them in a new setting. Take a woodworking course, for example.

"We're teaching problem solving," Davis said. "Give them a 4 by 8 (foot) piece of plywood and say, 'OK, we need a desk.'"

And for students who are planning a career in a vocational field, instructors try to keep them on the cutting edge.

A few years ago, Taylor's woodworking lab became home to a CNC (computer numerical control) router - a machine that can etch words and designs, bore holes and finish edges on wood projects through a computer program.

"That's where manufacturing is going," said Taylor.

Furniture manufacturing may be moving out of Surry County and northwest North Carolina, but Taylor said "the wood products industry is still doing very well in this country." In fact, there are many mill wood companies in the state - such as in the High Point and Hickory areas - that need good workers now.

"The jobs are there, the programs are here - it's just the jobs aren't here (in Surry County)," said Taylor.

The CNC machine - which also is used in metal and plastics industries in addition to wood production - is not included on any list of standard classroom equipment. Nor are students expected to master it for their VoCATS (vocational competency achievement tracking system) exams at the end of the course. It's in Taylor's shop just so students "get a taste of that technology," he said.

Taylor's students also got a taste of the prevalence of CNC technology on a field trip to Stiles Machinery in High Point, where they watched a CNC cut out the fixtures for an entire door - including holes and grooves for the lock.

Company representatives were very accommodating to the students, Taylor said, practically shutting down their building for a tour and providing a pizza lunch and presentations about their work.

"You would have thought it was a recruiting session," he said.

Unfortunately, the ever-present challenge of funding programs means all public schools have to work to provide the most they can for students on a limited budget. Offering new and higher-level classes becomes even trickier when that class comes with specific equipment requirements.

Davis said he would like to add Computer Engineering II to the high school's offerings, but the networking course requires a computer lab setup the school doesn't have. Allied health classes also have equipment requirements.

But Davis - who 30 years ago taught a keyboarding class using cardboard boxes with keys drawn on them before the school had computers - does his best to balance equipment and personnel needs.

About 10 CTE teachers at the high school each take on as many courses as they can handle - a maximum of three each semester - to meet demand. And students also can pursue courses such as cosmetology or upper-level industrial classes at Surry Community College.

If more funds were to become available, Davis said he could certainly find a use for them.

"The interest in allied health so far is there," he said. "We could definitely add a part-time, if not a full-time, teacher."

Course offerings don't change a lot, but Davis and CTE instructors do try to cater to student interest. After a marketing class failed to attract full classes, the staff opted to replace it with another course from the same program area. Travel, Tourism and Recreation Marketing will make its debut with a full class in the spring semester.

New statewide courses of study set to take effect in the 2009-2010 school year will aim to put more North Carolina high school students on a college-prep curriculum - one that doesn't have a CTE requirement. Davis said he doesn't know yet whether that will affect his program, which owes a lot of its enrollment to Mount Airy's local requirement of four CTE or arts courses, but the relevance of CTE courses won't change.

"We do what we think is right for our students, to prepare our students," he said. "I try to get all students to take some of our classes."



Laura Thompson/The News Manuel Camacho, a senior at Mount Airy High School, uses a CNC routing machine to add decoration to the base of a wooden serving tray in his Furniture and Cabinetmaking II class last week.



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