

WSWHE BOCES encourages girls to consider lucrative trade careers



Construction trades instructor John Coffinger helps a prospective student use a miter saw while a group of female students from component districts tour the Southern Adirondack Education Center in Hudson Falls. Photo courtesy of WSWHE BOCES

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

When educators at Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES began reviewing enrollments in career and technical education (CTE) programs more than a year ago, they noticed a pattern: low enrollment of female students.

Currently, female students make up less than 7% of enrollments in 10 historically male-dominated programs including heavy equipment maintenance and operation, automotive technology and environmental conservation.

"If we have a year with one or two female students in HVAC [heating, ventilation and air conditioning], that's a lot," said Nancy DeStefano, assistant superintendent for instructional programs at WSWHE BOCES.

Meanwhile, employers say they are nothing short of desperate for CTE graduates with training in a number of high-paying fields. They also are hoping to diversify their workforces; women account for just 10% of those employed in the construction industry, according to 2020 figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the skilled fields of plumbing, electrical work and welding, women make up just 3% of workers.

After studying the data, BOCES officials saw an opportunity: expand enrollment to meet market demand by recruiting more female students. That would also satisfy goals in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion for both the BOCES and regional employers.

"It was one of those 'Aha!' moments," said DeStefano.

An effort was launched last August with events at last year's Washington County Fair. Those included a luncheon for students with state legislators, superintendents and counselors and a panel that featured successful tradeswomen.

During October and November of 2021, more than 100 female students in the ninth and 10th grades participated in "mini career expos" at BOCES education centers. Students could team up with current BOCES students and instructors to try hands-on work, such as changing tires or spray painting, and learn about careers in automotive technology, auto body repair, environmental conservation and forestry, heavy equipment operation, HVAC and welding.

So far, not much has changed. "We can't see it in enrollment, yet," said Maribeth Macica, senior public information specialist for the BOCES. "It's a little too early."

But recruiting efforts are continuing this school year. Friday, August 26, was CTE Day at the Washington County Fair. Career expos at BOCES locations will continue. Also, BOCES educators will speak at assemblies in component districts to encourage students to consider CTE.

Employers are hoping it works. "We are screaming for people," said Aindrea Lundberg, who works in human resources for The Fort Miller Group, whose subsidiaries do work in construction, steel fabrication, paving and precast concrete. "We are having to turn down jobs because we don't have enough people."

Fort Miller's recent job postings included calls for machine operators, construction workers, a mechanical designer, a small tool maintenance technician and welders. Lundberg said she expects the need to continue, since many in the workforce are approaching retirement age.

"We rely heavily on BOCES programs to help us fill jobs," Lundberg said, adding that a new pool of female applicants would help a lot. "There are a lot more women out there who are capable of doing these types of jobs. But if they don't see it, they can't be it."

What draws female students to CTE?

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

Four young women studying at Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES are among those blazing trails for future female students as they work to master skills that can ignite their own careers.

By showcasing their growing knowledge and skills, WSWHE BOCES hopes to encourage other girls and young women to discard gender stereotypes when they consider enrolling in Career and Technical Education programs.

Catherine Hall

"I grew up around equipment a lot, so I knew I wanted to do something with that," said Catherine Hall, a heavy equipment operation and maintenance student who lives on a farm with her family in the town of Thurman. "A lot of girls in my family, including my mom – they can do anything they want. They're not excluded because of that. So, I grew up with that mindset, and I still have that mindset."

Hall, who will be a senior at Bolton Central School in the fall, is looking to get a jump start on her career with the work skills she is learning at BOCES.

In the last school year, Hall's BOCES assignments called on her to master details about transmissions, safety features, maintenance schedules and electronics. In addition to her math classes at Bolton, she took BOCES math classes that focused on the practical aspects of slopes and grades and tasks like converting feet to miles.

Hall hopes to get her learner's permit for a commercial driver's license (CDL) when she turns 18 in September. She also would like to land a work internship with a construction company.

Liz, Grace and Laura Goodspeed

"I've always loved cars. So, when I heard about auto tech in 10th grade, I knew this was a class I had to be in," said Liz Goodspeed, who was a Schuylerville High School senior when she spoke with *On Board* in the spring.

Goodspeed graduated from Schuylerville High School and the WSWHE BOCES Career and Technical Education program in June.

Liz and her younger sisters, twins Laura and Grace, say their parents' work and family activities contributed to their affinity for motorized vehicles. Their father has worked as a mechanic. Their mother learned heavy equipment skills at BOCES, has a commercial driver's license and drives a bus.

Family activities and hobbies introduced the younger Goodspeeds to auto racing, construction work and truck and tractor pulls at county fairs.

Grace Goodspeed likes the outdoors and has been astounded by the breadth of knowledge she gained in her junior year with the environmental conservation program.

"When we're out in the field, we do surveying and a ton of other things," she said. "I never thought I'd be doing all these things when I got into the program. I was thinking there's only a chainsaw here – but no. There are so many other things. We have the log loader, we have the 'dozer (bulldozer) and our RTV (rough terrain vehicle) and we have two tractors. I never thought I'd get this much opportunity."

And for Laura Goodspeed, it is the care, precision and artistry that go into auto body work that most inspire her.

"I, personally, just love the work," she said. "We repair damage, we fix dents, we refinish, we do painting. I like making it look pretty. I like to make it look cool and original and my style."

Editor's note: Liz, Grace and Laura are cousins to school board member Alison Goodspeed, who is quoted on page 8.



Catherine Hall



Laura, Liz and Grace Goodspeed