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By Karin Elton, Marshall Independent

On a path to success

Proud MA-TEC students shared their stories this week

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series touching on education issues as legislators visited Marshall on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Minnesota House Rep. Joe Schomacker visited Marshall Area Technical and Educational Center Tuesday to see the training model that serves adults and youth in Marshall. Students from a welding class and a certified nursing assistant class shared what the class meant to them.

MARSHALL - "This is it? I'm going to do this for the rest of my life?" Noe Verdin said to himself after working at a dead-end job. He's now attending a welding class, which is allowing him to dream about a different future - "build up (work) experience, buy a home, travel, find a job wherever I go," he said. He wants to do underwater welding someday.



Photo by Karin Elton

David Black had a summer job working 12-hour shifts "putting little boxes into bigger boxes" at a local company.

"I knew this wasn't for me," he said.

The two are among the adults and high schoolers who are taking welding and nursing assistant classes at Marshall Area Technical and Educational Center.

District 22A House Rep. Joe Schomacker, R-Luverne, who represents all or parts of Rock, Nobles, Pipestone, Murray, Lincoln, and Lyon counties, had expressed an interest to Pat Thomas of Adult Basic Education that he would like to know more about the nursing assistant classes since he is chairman of the Aging and Long-Term Care Policy committee.

"Pat's come to my attention several times," he said.

Thomas assembled a group that included the students; Bruce Lamprecht, Marshall Public Schools business director; Karen VanKeulen, school board member; Michelle Noriega of MA-TEC; Harry Weilage, Marshall Community Services; Ron Wood, former interim Southwest Minnesota State University president and former Minnesota West president; Tom Hoff of Southwest West Central Service Cooperative; Carol Dombek and Juanita Lauritsen of Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council; and Tammy Gustafson, representing Boulder Estates.

Lois Schmidt from Project Turnabout facilitated the meeting to allow students from both the CNA and welding trainings to share their experiences.

The training provided allows the students the ability to move into needed jobs in the region. This effort is a result of a collaboration among Marshall Public schools, Adult Education, Workforce or Private Industry Council, Minnesota West and local employers.

The certified nursing assistant class is comprised of eight adults and seven youth. Thomas said that this class is the only career training in the state of Minnesota with adults and youth co-enrolled. The class is at capacity level.

Schomacker said there is a great need for CNAs.

"You can have enrollment 10 times that amount and still wouldn't have enough," he said.

Thomas said post-session interviews have revealed that the co-mingling of ages is beneficial to both groups.

David Black, who is 16 and homeschooled, agrees. In the first semester, there was only one adult, and in the second semester there is three. He has noticed that when adults are in the class the respect level for the teachers rises, the cellphone usage is down as well as class interruptions.

Brittney Lien said this training will not only benefit her, but her 4-year-old daughter will have a better life as well. She works for REM for 12 hours a week, but "it's hard to live off of that," she said. With a CNA, she will be able to work more hours.

Marshall High School senior Fadumo Ismail said she appreciates the program's flexibility - it allows her to be a student at the high school and still

participate in activities such as speech and Knowledge Bowl. She plans on using her CNA training to kick off an eventual career as a physician assistant.

"I'm looking forward to getting a CNA and doing very meaningful work," she said. "I'm dedicated to taking care of people."

Nordin said he will use his welding knowledge for jobs and hobbies and plans to continue his education by attending MinnWest at the Jackson campus and getting his diploma next year.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity," he said.

Thomas pointed out that the welding course gives the student 16 college credits.

MATEC student Desirae Ramirez said she appreciates how the classes fit into her school schedule.

"The teachers do a good job," she said. "I'm grateful to Linda (Van Iperen) and Gail (Schneider)

Van Iperen is an instructor from MinnWest and Schneider provides additional support from Marshall ABE.

Lien said not only does this program help with passing the CNA test, but it helps with "resumes, cover letters, what not to do on interviews. It sets you up for success."

Ramirez said the CNA course is just the beginning.

"It's the first step, LPN, RN as far as I can go. I'm very grateful for this opportunity."

Noriega said Marshall Public Schools has been "amazing in their support. They've provided welding equipment which is housed here. They are 100 percent behind the program. There are two different populations, but the goal is the same, to have a pathway in a career."

Noriega said one stumbling block to technical education is the dearth of instructors.

"We need flexibility in licensure," she said. "it's rigid and understandably so, but in the immediate future, it is sometimes best to have a community expert."

Weilage agreed and added "South Dakota is kicking us."

He said local companies and industries contributing money have "skin in the game," are "investing in the students. Without an educated workforce, those businesses go away."

Wood, who has been in the higher education field for 40 years, said technical education has been going downhill, but sees the possibility of a resurgence.

"Technical education isn't cheap," he said. "We need to have money coming in. We are fortunate to have SWIF, Bremer and Blandin foundations."

Hoff echoed Wood's comments. Hoff is from Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, which has an 18-county region and serves 60 to 70 schools.

"I've seen career and technical school take a steady nosedive," he said. "I think there is an interest in having a resurgence."

Hoff said the program needs steady reliable financial support.

"We can't always count on business and industry, while we are appreciative," he said.

SWWC has taken a poll at high schools and there is "incredible interest" in technical education, "but there are very few technical educators out there to hire and our small school districts cannot support the programs they used to in the past. We are particularly interested in collaboration."