

Industries show teachers what it takes



Virginia Annable Aug 27, 2018 12:09 AM

About 75 career and technical education teachers, who teach students trade and career skills, toured eight companies as part of the Caldwell County Economic Development Commission's Hired Education program, which is aimed at showing the variety of good, well-paid jobs that are available here — and what getting those jobs requires — so the teachers can talk knowledgeably to their students about the subject.

In the chaos of a furniture factory, with the regular beating of upholstery tacks being pounded into chair backs and the quick spurts of dozens of staple guns filling the room, Beth Fox, a teacher at William Lenoir Middle School, stood surrounded by about 30 her fellow educators. Before her stood Rick Coffey, president of McCreary Modern, a furniture manufacturer, explaining how manufacturing in the plant works, the roles each employee plays and how



actly he picks those employees.



"I tell everyone they need to know two things," Coffey said, the teachers eagerly listening as he yelled over the buzz of the upholstery floor.

Then he pulled a ruler from his pocket and said the first is how to use a ruler. With that, Fox let out an excited yell of "Yes!"

Now, when her students ask why they need to know how to use a ruler or other math skills, Fox can point to Coffey's advice — that they can't get a high-paying manufacturing job without those skills.

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Some of the main things employers told this group they want in a potential employee were some basic math, science and technology comprehension and being willing to work and learn.

Hired Education usually involves just 30 teachers. This trip, however, was extra special, because it was the second Hired Education trip of the year and was double the size of the usual group, EDC Executive Director Deborah Murray said.

“We’ve always felt like ... we need to do it more. I said I’d take as many teachers as I could and do a full day of touring — and here we are,” she said.

Dawn Smith, a business teacher at Granite Falls Middle School, said the tour is exactly what she and other CTE teachers needed. As the tour bus neared each stop, starting with NEPTCO, her eyes lit up with excitement.

“If we can say to our students who are thinking about their futures, ‘I’ve been to NEPTCO,’ or some other business, ‘and these are the jobs there, and these are the skills you need to get those jobs,’ that’s huge,” Smith said.

Inside NEPTCO, plant manager Tom Herman led the teachers through a maze of machinery to see all that goes into making the tape manufactured by the company. As he did, he talked about each employee’s role and what he looks for in a potential hire. The positions range from maintenance of the machines that put adhesive on the tape to testing that tape in a lab with chemicals and advanced laboratory technology, such as a gas chromatograph.

Herman said the company has trouble filling these positions — only 30 percent of new hires stay longer than three months — because many are unwilling to put in the effort needed or don’t have good comprehension of math. He hopes by telling teachers the problems he’s seeing, they’ll be able to better prepare their students to go to work, and tell them that there are high-paying jobs available.

“We want to partner with teachers, and we want to help them,” he said.

Hearing that desire from companies to support teachers and work with them to help students was important, Smith said.

The group of teachers Smith was in, all of whom taught middle school or traditional trades such as masonry or welding, heard the same sentiments at McCreary Modern, Sealed Air Corp., which makes plastic packaging items including Bubble Wrap, and Caseworx, which builds cabinets.

“The problems we see in schools, an unwillingness to work and not wanted to learn basic skills, is the same thing they’re seeing in their companies,” Smith said. “Neither of us have quite cracked the code, but if we work together it will help.”

At Sealed Air, teachers donned bright orange vests, safety glasses and green earplugs to tour the plant where much of Amazon’s shipping packaging is made. On the tour, a printing teacher recognized machinery used to print the Amazon logo on yellow envelopes, Smith said.

“He never would have known that without that tour. Now, he can tell his students about a place that has printing jobs where he never would have realized before,” she said.

A second group of teachers, who teach high school business, health sciences and family and consumer sciences, saw some of Caldwell County’s more advanced industry, visiting Exela

Pharma Sciences, which manufactures pharmaceuticals and medical equipment; Stallergene
er, also a pharmaceuticals manufacturer; Caldwell Memorial Hospital; and Bernhardt

Furniture’s design department.

Wayne Mitchell, a teacher at Gateway School, was in the second group, said the trip gave him an opportunity to see exactly what’s out there for his students, and how they can get there with just a little bit of training beyond their high school diploma.

“By visiting local businesses, that makes us more aware of what’s locally available,” Mitchell said. “That gives me the information to push them that direction if that’s what they want to do.”

Mitchell said not all students are meant for a four-year degree, which is where he, as a CTE teacher, can step in to help students who want to go right to work. Hired Education gave him specific information he needs to know about the skills employers are looking for, he said.

“This was, without a doubt, the most beneficial tour like this I’ve ever been on,” Mitchell said.

“This was really good.”