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What the future holds for students of all kinds

Local manufacturer hosts state Department of Workforce Development

By Jennifer Eisenbart
EDITOR

Local manufacturer Precision Plus had plenty of reason to celebrate last week.

The Elkhorn-based company, which now also owns the former Easley building in Walworth, hosted Jennifer Sereno, the Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, May 9, to celebrate National Youth Apprenticeship Week.

The event drew more than a few of Precision Plus's partners in the youth apprenticeship field. Gateway Technical College had Katie Graf, the director of high school partnerships, in attendance, as well as Mike Dahle and Chris Trottier, who handle the three arms of Elkhorn Area School District's high school programs.

Also at the event was Barry Butters, direction of education and training at Precision Plus Inc.

The day was also supposed to include Elkhorn Area School District Superintendent Jason Tadlock, but President Joe Biden's visit to the state – to announce an investment in AI development in Sturtevant – pre-empted his appearance.

It was a celebration of the opportunities that Precision Plus – which is transitioning now to Reader Precision Solutions, with the acquisition of new properties – has offered in the youth apprenticeship field.

"National Youth Apprenticeship Week is a very important time for us," said president and owner Mike Reader at the event. "We can't expect the youth to understand what we do and the beauty of what we do every day unless we invite them in," adding, "Human capital to us is like



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Reader Precision Solutions and Precision Plus in Elkhorn hosted a National Youth Apprenticeship Week event at the business last week. Above: RPS owner Michael Reader (left) and his director of training and education, Barry Butters (center) lead a tour of Precision Plus May 9. At right is Gateway Technical College Director of High School Partnerships Katie Graf. Top: Student apprentice David Redford (from left) listens as Ray Reader of RPS talks while Amanda Griffoull, VP of Human Resources, looks on.

oxygen.

"We have a lot of expensive machine tools that do nothing without talented people," Reader said.

Sereno and others in attendance took part in a brief roundtable discussion that addressed the youth apprenticeship opportunities in the area, particularly through Reader Precision Solutions. That was followed by a brief tour of the Precision Plus property.

Gateway Technical College's YA Consortium works in 11 different school districts in the area, including Lake Geneva Badger, Big Foot, Burlington, Delavan-Darien, Watertown, Union Grove, Westosha Central, Williams Bay, Whitewater and Wilmot.

The Youth Apprenticeship Con-

sortium has impressive numbers. There are 176 youth apprentices at 148 different employers through Gateway, and those students had logged more than 80,000 hours of work and earned more than \$1.1 million.

The largest programs involve connecting students with the following fields: architecture and construction, hospitality and tourism, agriculture, food and natural resources, health (and health care) and, of course, manufacturing.

Elkhorn's trio of high school options – Elkhorn Area High School, the College and Career Academy and Options Virtual Charter School – are at the heart of the partnership.

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at least when it comes to Precision Plus.

“There’s going to be a war for talent moving forward,” Reader explained, pointing to the shortage of workforce-appropriate employees.

The idea, he explained, is to get high school age students to understand that four-year colleges aren’t always the best fit for all students.

“We’re just trying to provide them a chance to look at an alternate path,” Reader said. “I would rather help them understand what manufacturing careers look like when they’re 16 or 17, when they’re able to adjust their education plans.”

Reader Precision Solutions has had youth apprentices at the company since 2013, and those students are either working on marketing communications or manufacturing. A total of 51 YAs have gone through the business, with five working there this year.

Among those are J. Anthony Ortiz-Arroyo – a graduate who now works full-time at Reader Precision Solutions – and David Redford, an Elkhorn Area High School student who is apprenticing in the marketing program.

Ortiz-Arroyo said he “had no clue” what he was getting into when he approached Joel, Anne Pella for career advice. Pella, the former CTE Coordinator for EASD, is now retired.

As it turned out, Amanda Griffoul, VP of Human Resources at Precision Plus, was on hand at EAHS that day to

interview a student for a youth apprenticeship, and Ortiz-Arroyo was added to the agenda.

Both students ended up involved in the youth apprenticeship program, and Ortiz-Arroyo said he found a job that he loved.

Redford started around the same time in the late fall of 2022. He said “there was a lot of stuff I enjoyed doing, but nothing that really stuck out.”

He took a day trip from school to check out options in the area, and met Ray Reader. The next thing he knew, he was an apprentice.

At the roundtable last week, Ray Reader said “these kids have so many more skills than I had at that age.”

Using social media, Reader Precision Solutions is getting out in the community and recruiting students.

“Getting in front of them ... is our biggest return on investment,” Ray Reader said.

Butters said the investment of time in the community is paying off. He’s gone to talk to second-grade students about manufacturing jobs, and had middle school kids tour the plant last year.

“It’s actually become quite easy, because we’re well known,” he explained.

Now Mike Reader wants to see other businesses in the area step up. Having been “aggressively” pursuing talent for 12 years, he wants others to step up to the plate.

“We can’t do it all by ourselves,” he explained. “Be part of the solution.”