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PROJECT LEAD THE WAY

Builders, hoping to get Kennett students interested in trades, collaborate with high school

BY FRAN MAYE



Kennett High School students check out the upper floor of a house during an educational tour that showed them how houses are constructed.

KENNETT SQUARE—When Tom Bentley, who builds custom homes in Chester County, had a meeting with Barry Tomasetti, Kennett Consolidated schools chief recently, the conversation drifted to reasons so many students are not taking up the trades.

“I told him that he is training kids to be lawyers and doctors, but there are good jobs in the construction industry,” Bentley said. “During the recession, our ranks got wiped out. There are all kinds of opportunities available today in this business, from plumbing and heating, electrical work, to managing and surveying land development and real estate.” So last week, about 30 students in Kennett’s STEM classes got an up-close view of what is involved in the building industry by touring Bentley’s Stonehouse development on South Union Street.

The houses are in various stages of construction, but when finished, a 38-townhouse development will be on the site. Kennett High now offers a curriculum called Project Lead the Way in which students and teachers design homes while working within Habitat for Humanity construction guidelines.



Kennett High School students get instruction on how builders are using drones in the building industry.

Students get a chance to see actual homes under construction, and to better understand whether it’s an occupation right for them.

“Our latest collaboration with Bentley homes is allowing our students to rub elbows with real world engineers and architects, and this experience is allowing them to further understand that the core subject areas have purpose beyond the classroom,” Tomasetti said.

“Over the years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of Kennett graduates that study engineering at the university level, and I credit the competence of our mathematics, science and technology teachers across the district for creating this focus.”

High schools and colleges have struggled for decades to attract students to job-oriented classes ranging from carpenters to welders to plumbers. But students who take up the trades are seeing increased salaries because supply is down.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, median pay for HVAC technicians is \$21.46 per hour, or \$44,630 per year. For plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters, the median pay for is \$24.36 an hour, or \$50,660 a year. For electricians, it’s \$51,110 annually.

Not to mention the cost of college has increased more than 260 percent in the past 35 years. Tuition and housing for a four-year post-secondary institution is approximately \$25,000 per year. And student loans aren’t a burden for these students.

There more than 44 million borrowers in the United States who collectively owe \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt. The average student has \$37,172 in student loan debt.



Kennett High School students hear about how drones are helping builders in the construction industry.

“If you look at the amount of debt these kids pick up, and the jobs are not always that plentiful, this (trades) makes sense for some,” he said. “I think it’s better to go to junior college and get a foundation.”

And student with a good work ethic, Bentley, stand to make serious money in their lives. “I know a lot of plumbers, electricians and painters who are millionaires,” he said.

For the students who braved 12-degree weather to get a better understanding of the building industry, they are part of a movement between educators and builders gaining traction in the nation. Students got a chance to learn from Bentley construction engineers, surveyors and project managers. They even saw how builders today are using technology like drones to assist in the business.

“We are struggling to find sub-contractors and qualified people,” Bentley said. “It’s the biggest concern of all small builders, even larger ones



Kennett students read plans for townhomes during a tour of a construction site in Kennett Square recently.

across the country. We’re looking now at going into universities to recruit kids right of school and train them.”

“Partnerships like this between business and education enrich learning and provide practical exposure for students that help guide career and college choices,” said Lydia Hallman, the director of curriculum and mathematics and science instruction at Kennett High School, who involved in the initial planning for the visit. “This particular learning opportunity was literally steps from the high school and there are many more like it.”

Kennett Consolidated School District offers students advanced STEM electives that include Introduction to Engineering, Principles of Engineering, Aerospace Engineering and Civil Engineering and Architecture using Project Lead the Way curriculum.

The carriage townhomes start in the low 500s and the model units will be available to tour in mid-March. Other Bentley projects in Kennett Square include Walnut Walk and Pemberton, both townhouse communities, and Marlboro Springs, a single-family development.



Kennett students talk to builders about the construction during Project Lead The Way.