

This isn't your parents' shop class

"All of our technology is moving toward technical trades and a need for technical skills."

By Jennifer L. Williams | 247-4644

December 26, 2008

HAMPTON - — Votech training may not be what you think it is anymore. As jobs have evolved, so has the preparation workers need for them.

Officials at New Horizons Regional Education Centers are trying to get the word out locally, through their Web site and a video that explains the latest developments. Local high school students share facilities in Hampton and [Newport News](#) for this training, taking half-day classes there.

The challenge has been to get word to parents that the classes they called "shop" can be beneficial for all students.

"It's been a battle," said David Creamer, principal of the New Horizons Career and Technical Education Center's Butler Farm Campus.

"In fact, Mr. Johnson and I have been fighting it now for about three or four years," Creamer said, referring to [Joe Johnson](#), executive director at New Horizons. "And it's a gradual process."

"Career" and "technology" training are terms that have replaced those such as "vocational."

The classes are more automated now, and big changes in industries such as manufacturing have called for more sophisticated preparation of workers starting at a younger age.

"We're pushing manufacturing programs right now because there's a real need in the area — especially welding," Creamer said. "Welding hasn't seen as much technology, but machining and robotics, and automotive, have."

For example, New Horizons' electronics program will change to the more advanced robotics and fiber optics for next school year. A machining curriculum will include a more advanced class on actually programming machinery.

"It's definitely evolving, and it has definitely changed," said Joanne Talmage, an electronics instructor at New Horizons. "Technology changed a lot of our life here — the things that we used to teach."

Johnson said a continuing strong need for what has historically been called "general trades" is linking with heavy emphasis on strong science and math training in a sort of middle ground of technician jobs. Traditional general trades include construction, manufacturing, welding, machining, HVAC and carpentry.

"All of our technology is moving toward technical trades and a need for technical skills," Johnson said.

"Today's world is blending, and the greatest amount of jobs is in that middle area," he said. "It requires more than a high school diploma — 80 percent now require that — but may not require a bachelor's degree."

Apprentice or community college programs that add onto already completed high school-level courses will qualify workers. Local pipelines to prepare workers for Canon, [Northrop Grumman Newport News](#) and [NASA](#) show a strong need for high technical trades, Johnson said.

An aging work force in the general trades has created a need for high school graduates with the additional technical skills to enter that work force. Another part of that work force, requiring strong

academic and technical training for technician level jobs, is in high demand as well.

"We're really sort of training for both those tiers," Johnson said.

New Horizons, [Thomas Nelson Community College](#) and the Peninsula Workforce Development Center are at the center of this type of training locally. Several local high schools have their own facilities, but the majority of the job-matched instruction in welding and machine technology comes through that partnership.

[Alcoa](#) Howmet has given New Horizons grants of \$20,000 and \$25,000 to help promote its manufacturing program, Creamer said. Last year, it used part of the money to pay for the Web video, and this year is using it for one-minute commercials to show at high schools.

There is still a lingering mentality among guidance counselors that career and technical training is only for those students not going to college, but directly into the work force, Creamer said.

Slowly, that is changing.

Half his students go to two- or four-year educational institutions within a year of graduating from high school, he said. Some use their skills to earn money for further education or as a skill they can always fall back on.

"It doesn't have to be exclusive of college — it can be very much inclusive," Creamer said. "So we're excited about that. And that's the big change, I believe."

Enrollment in some programs is up, and more is expected with the new robotics program. A machining program that was on the verge of being closed down three years ago with only six or seven students annually is now up to 17 or 18 — and is gradually moving toward a goal of doubling that number.

"Each year we're seeing more and more interest," Creamer said, "especially as they hear about the high-paying jobs or the good-paying jobs that are coming to kids straight out of high school."

On the Net

For more on New Horizons Regional Education Centers' Career and Technical Education Center, visit

www.nhgs.tec.va.us/careertechnicalcenter