

Building trades ramp up recruiting

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Waning interest in the construction trades has prompted New Horizons and Thomas Nelson to get creative.

Starting jobs in carpentry, HVAC, electrical and plumbing pay \$30,000-\$40,000, but high school and community college enrollment has fluctuated in the trades.

"We figured out that the only way we could get the numbers in these classes is to include a high school program and to open it up as well to adults," said Dave Creamer, principal of New Horizons at Hampton.

One upshot is that high school students will be able to get 13 college credit hours on their way to certification.

WJC Schools and York Schools contribute funds to educate their students at New Horizons in Hampton and Newport News.

New Horizons began discussing the idea with the college and the Peninsula Council on Workforce Development about three years ago.

"The construction industry is aging," Creamer said. "The leadership in the industry is aging, and they need to groom their future supervisors and leaders."

The new Construction Science program at New Horizons will introduce students to the trades. Once enrollment builds, the two-year program will expose high school students to all four trades.

Bill Walsh of Walsh Electric in Yorktown has been a supporter of the program from the start. He considers it a great way to help high school students get started in a trade.

"The skilled trades are graying so much -- the electricians, the plumbers and such," he said. "The future of these trades will be coming out of these kids."

The first year of the program will help students secure their OSHA certifications and offer a hands-on exploration of all four trades. In the second year, students get to take college courses at Thomas Nelson. A semester may be devoted to green technologies like fuel cells and wind.

Creamer explained that New Horizons and Thomas Nelson pitched the program to high school guidance counselors and got excellent response, but student interest was lacking.

"We went out and advertised for this program, but we must not have done a good enough job because we only got 8 to 10 people responding," he said. "Because these are such tough budget times, we just don't have the money to start a new program without a significant response."

He's hoping that today, with the backing of the local construction industry, it will gain momentum.

The carpentry lab at New Horizons' Hampton campus will be renovated in the coming school year to house the program. Creamer anticipates starting the program in 2011-12 if there is enough student interest.