

# Southwestern Pennsylvania Program Helps Train and Retain Students

A shop teacher is providing real-world certifications for jobs in southwestern Pennsylvania's resource-rich economy.

By Andrew Soergel, Economy Reporter

**N**estled in resource-rich southwestern Pennsylvania, where coal mining, steel working and manufacturing once reigned supreme, Greene County's borough of Waynesburg has for years battled a shrinking population.

The Census Bureau estimates the local population declined by nearly 4 percent between mid-2010 and mid-2016, with nearly one-in-five residents last year over the age of 65. Many young people have opted to leave their hometown for education and work opportunities unavailable in the region.

"Being from eastern Ohio, I identify a lot with what's happening in Waynesburg. A lot of kids have to leave for jobs, and they want to be close to home. And they may not have that opportunity," says Lee Ann Wainwright, a public affairs representative who leads the STEM Education Investment Team at Chevron.

The area's economy still depends on natural resources. Mining, quarrying and oil and gas jobs accounted for nearly 20 percent of Greene County's total employment in 2016, according to Pennsylvania's Department of Labor and Industry.

But thankfully for Greene County and Waynesburg, mining and resource jobs are rebounding after years of sluggishness, thanks in part to work being done on the local Marcellus and Utica shale natural gas deposits. Employment prospects in the region have picked up - and schools and private-sector companies such as Chevron have both funneled resources into education and training to help develop and retain young workers.

"The workforce demand is definitely there in Greene County, for sure," says Justin Golsky, a shop teacher at

Waynesburg Central High School who developed a student certification curriculum that eventually attracted the attention and investment of Chevron. "I'm helping them get the job, but they're sticking around because the jobs are there."

Golsky for years has driven trucks, operated heavy machinery and worked a series of industrial and mining-related side jobs in addition to teaching at Waynesburg. For many of these positions, though, he's been required to complete time-intensive safety certification requirements. After sitting through a series of these programs, he realized he'd be able to incorporate similar credentialing into the classroom to help give students a leg up on their eventual job competition.

"We teach everything from basic safety to on-site well location safety. We do H<sub>2</sub>S [or hydrogen sulfide] training, which is a gas that's very deadly and common. ... We do introduction to pipeline safety. We kind of tie in the whole industry of construction and oil and gas into one ball of wax," Golsky says. "They even take their offshore training, so they have an offshore card, as well. So if they would work for Halliburton or somebody, they would have the basic credentials to go offshore."

Golsky says he had about 15 students go through the program this past year and has previously had as many as 25 take his class at once. He says he gets a "great mix of students," from those looking to graduate high school and go straight into the local workforce to AP students hoping to set themselves apart as they pursue petroleum engineering degrees.

"I got a text this morning from a former student. He texted me a picture of his hard hat that he got for his new job.

He just got hired and he starts this week at some point. He was real proud," Golsky says. "These kids are getting jobs that are paying twice what I'm making as a teacher. I always tell them I'm the crazy one because they're the ones making the big bucks."

One such former student is David Price, a 20-year-old Waynesburg native working in the region's natural gas industry. He says he's been able to use the certifications and skills he learned years ago in Golsky's class for "every job I've had since graduating high school."

"The employers that I had were very impressed. That saved them money and time, and they sent me straight to work instead of paying me to sit in a classroom and go through that training all over again," he says. "Plus, I'm more of a hands-on guy. I grew up farming and stuff like that. So the whole classroom deal wasn't really my thing. But it helped me out a lot – got me where I am today, making very good money for myself."

But funding the program wasn't cheap. Golsky estimates training courses necessary for him to teach the classes cost "at least \$2,500 a piece" and that testing materials cost "on average around \$250 a student throughout the year."

So Annette Vietmeier, the school district's director of curriculum, instruction, technology and federal programs, eventually linked up with Wainwright and Chevron to see if they'd help fund the program.

"[Golsky] had done so much of the research before Annette found me to assist in the funding. And I can't applaud him enough for the research he's done. I was attending energy roundtables and workforce roundtables every other day, and they were all talking about what we needed to do. And here's this school doing it," Wainwright says. "And it wasn't in the career and tech center. It was in the high school as an elective."

Wainwright works with Appalachia Partnership Initiative, a program Chevron helped establish in the region that invests in STEM and skills-training programs to help foster economic development and support the business efforts of both the company and its local partners. To date, the initiative – which was started in 2014 and fueled by a \$20 million investment from Chevron – has supported more than 90 STEM and skills-training programs in the 27 counties that make up southwestern Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and northern West Virginia.

[Graduates] may not end up at Chevron. They may end up with our business partners. ... But often, with our in-

vestments, our ultimate goal is to better the economic area where we're working. If a child graduates here and starts driving for a transportation company that has nothing to do with oil and gas, ultimately, they got a job. They were able to stay in the area. It betters the economy just from our investment in a program in a region," Wainwright says. "We wanted to make sure we were addressing those skills gaps in the workforce that had been identified already by the time we started working here."

One of the most significant aspects of Golsky's course, Wainwright says, is the development of "soft skills" or "leadership skills" outside of the physical certifications they earn through the course. She says students are required to pass a drug test to earn certain credentials – which she thinks teaches them the "reality that there's an expectation after graduation."

"I'm trying to teach an attitude – to be drug free, to show up to work, to put long hours in. I think the parents like it because [the students are] getting parenting from someone that's not a parent," Golsky says.

He says his program's next step is likely to be a commercial driver's license unit that will certify students to operate large vehicles – a potential boon for a trucking and shipping industry that's hurting for young applicants. He says the school plans to buy a commercial truck to help put its graduates even further ahead of other job applicants.

"Even the engineers at a lot of companies have to have CDLs to mobilize the equipment. Everyone kind of needs their CDLs in the oil fields, so that's why we're doing it," Golsky says.

Wainwright says she's thrilled by the program's prospects for expanding, and Price says he's encouraged that Golsky's work is continuing to set others up for quality jobs that won't necessarily force them to move away from home.

"Nobody in life is really going to help you out other than yourself. [Golsky] gave us the opportunity. We took it. And now we're all doing really well for ourselves," Price says of himself and his fellow classmates. "I just wish somehow we could get this across to other places and other schools. As much as it helped me, if it can help another kid ... If it can light a fire under some kid's ass to get to work and get out there and make some money, that'd be a great thing."

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