

## High School Program Offers a Real Career Path

Written by Marc Courtenay  
Wednesday, 20 March 2013

[0 Comments](#)



Editor's Note: As the Federal Reserve Board waits for the unemployment rate in the U.S. to eventually get below 6.5%, here's a real-life, inspiring story of a high school that's making a big, positive contribution towards helping all its students find a fulfilling career path. This is an exemplary model for high schools around the country, and the story is remarkable!

When I sat down to interview two remarkable high school teachers in Salem, Oregon I had no idea that in 21<sup>st</sup> century America there were any high school programs available to graduate students to be "Career Ready".

That all changed when I met Dean Mattson who teaches Leading Edge woodworking classes at North Salem High School. The classes offer a career-training path that, if successfully completed, will allow high school graduates to be nationally certified in the use of woodworking machines, CNC (computer numerically controlled) manufacturing equipment, software and procedures.

The graduates of Mr. Mattson's program receive a "certification passport", which equates to a national certification credential. "This means they can operate woods machinery and apply "Lean Manufacturing" technology in any kind of woods or other manufacturing companies nationwide."

This will empower them to directly enter the workforce.

Olympia, Washington-based Custom Source Woodworking, Inc. (CSW) has partnered with North Salem High School's Woods Program to provide a unique opportunity for students interested in pursuing a full-time employment in manufacturing, engineering and woodworking. It's a win-win relationship that began over 2 years ago, and it's ready to graduate high school students who are being offered good-paying employment.

The program, taught by Mr. Mattson, received prominence last year when the Woodworking Machinery Industry Association (WMIA) decided that Mr. Mattson's North Salem's cabinet manufacturing program was one of the premier programs for high schools and college in the nation.

The program has inspired students to want to learn more about mathematics since woodworking involves geometry, algebra and plenty of other mathematical calculations. That's when North Salem's I math teacher Mark Atkinson came aboard to coordinate efforts with Mr. Mattson. Atkinson is writing "leading edge math/woods curriculum" to educate students to apply subjects like math to the woods projects which in turn produces "real-world employment

opportunities”.

So not only is this unique high school program turning out skilled craftsmen who can qualify for jobs that await them, but it also inspires the students to see the importance of subjects like math. “We’re looking to graduate these students to be both career-ready and if they so chose, college ready too”, Mr. Mattson enthusiastically explained. Mr. Mattson’s extraordinary vision and passion for the program helped answer my question, “How is this program funded?” As the manufacturing industry and business leaders became aware of the quality of highly trained workers the program was producing, they wanted to be supportive. Mr. Mattson’s background in business and specifically the Woods Industry helped link the organizations together.

“We’ve raised around \$766,000 in 3 ½ years which includes donations of equipment, software, materials, and cash for our program. The “product” we’re turning out is the student...one who can move directly into the workforce with applicable skills and an outstanding work ethic”, Mattson and Atkinson told me. We stress integrity, and tell our students, “Always do what’s right when no one else is watching”.

With the resurgence in the manufacturing market as well as the emphasis to “Buy America Made Products” companies like CSW are struggling to find enough qualified people to operate the equipment used for cabinet-manufacturing. “There are currently 22,000 unfilled jobs in the manufacturing sector in America” Mattson stated. “We’ve told them (CSW) that we’ll train their future employees to operate sophisticated equipment (like CNC) if they’ll guarantee our graduates a good-paying job”, Mr. Mattson clarified for me.

“Mattson’s first year of teaching the program at North Salem High started with around 200 students (grades 9 through 12). This year we had over 800 students sign up, and we had to turn away between 350 and 400 students”, he explained.

Mattson likes what he calls “the fly-fishing metaphor”. “If you throw enough artificial flies on the waters’ surface to attract the fish to bite you’ll start catching fish. Woodworking is like the attractor flies and the students are the prized catch. If we make the program and the curriculum correlated with good future and job, the students want to be educated because they see the connection”.

“This is a new and effective model of education that will graduate more students, place them in jobs related to their training, and allow more students to pursue higher education”, Mr. Mattson pointed out. “Next year this model will educate approximately 900 students at North Salem High School, which, by the way is nearly half of the student body”, he concluded.

“Companies like CSW have around a 98% attrition rate among employees in the past.” A rightfully proud Mr. Mattson went on to say, “So far among our graduates the attrition rate has improved to 45- 50%, and that’s partly because they’re qualified upon graduating to start working at jobs that pay \$50,000-a-year (which includes the cost of employee benefits).”

I wondered, “Why did CSW partner with North Salem High School?” According to its website, and in the words of one of the partner-owners of CSW, “First [the first reason is because it’s] Mr. Mattson’s cabinet-manufacturing program. Mr. Mattson is an inspiring teacher, who is focused on teaching his students real life skills and a diligent work ethic grounded in integrity.”

Joe Wadsworth, the Founder of CSW stated, “I believe in what he is teaching. In order for CSW to continue to grow and succeed, I am seeking motivated, focused, skilled employees with *high integrity*. Mr. Mattson’s woodshop

program is unparalleled in the region, and he teaches his students to be true industry professionals.” Later I discovered that Mr. Mattson’s approach and class is the only one in the nation so far.

“Over 30 of them have contacted me in an effort to learn more about the ways they can practice and improve their woodworking abilities. They have a natural aptitude for craftsmanship, but are not willing to rely on their talent alone – they want to excel. North Salem students are driven, and I hope to provide them with an opportunity to succeed.”

The second reason why CSW’s owners wanted the North Salem students? “From day one, I have been truly impressed by the responsible and respectful attitudes of the students I’ve met. The young people enrolled in the North Salem High School Woodshop program are highly talented students.

This is an especially meaningful comment considering that North Salem High school is a “Title One” school with many first-generation Americans who are “E.L.L.” (English Language Learners).

Stiles Machines located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the woods industries largest manufacturer of CNC-related equipment have committed their equipment to provide a state-of-the-art education program that could be used as a national model.

“There are 22,000 industry-related jobs unfilled because there aren’t enough trained and certified employees who are adroit at CNC technology”, Mr. Mattson pointed out.

No wonder Mattson and Atkinson are proud teachers, mentors and visionaries. I’m hoping that educators around the country will take note of what is going on in the state capital of Salem and follow this meritorious example. You can contact Dean Mattson at [mattson\\_dean@salkeiz.k12.or.us](mailto:mattson_dean@salkeiz.k12.or.us) or Mark Atkinson at

[Atkinson\\_mark@salkeiz.k12.or.us](mailto:Atkinson_mark@salkeiz.k12.or.us)