

Because of a source error, a name was misspelled. Nathaniel Eckel was one of the North Salem High students hired by Custom Source Woodworking.

Students were wearing shirts and ties and [JROTC uniforms](#) in the wood shop at North Salem High School this past week, not your typical attire for a sawdust-covered working environment.

But this is not your typical wood shop.

This is the place where students are being trained for immediate employment in the woodworking industry.

The cabinet manufacturing program at North Salem has created a unique partnership with Custom Source Woodworking, a company out of Olympia, Wash. The president and vice president of the company spent all day Thursday at the school interviewing prospective employees, which explains the shirts, ties and dress uniforms.

We are not talking about mock interviews, something that many high school students get a chance to do. This was the real deal. And by the end of the day, Custom Source had committed to hiring five seniors from North Salem's woodworking program and a senior from the school's engineering program. Two underclassmen from engineering also received offers to work summers for the company.

"This is drawing national attention," teacher Dean Mattson said. "This is setting a new model for [career](#) technical education."

At a time when many [schools](#) no longer offer wood shop classes, North Salem has found a way to evolve and expand. The foundation of the program was built by longtime teacher Dave Anderson, who retired after hand-picking Mattson to replace him in 2009.

"My vision is this is a farm club, this is a minor league baseball organization," said Mattson, who has nearly 30 years of experience in the industry. "Because I'm a businessman, I know exactly what a production company wants.

"They come help set the curriculum, work with students for four years, take cream of the crop from over 1,000 kids, and the risk is zero. When these kids graduate, they know this company and the company knows them."

Mattson operates the program like a business, or a company. He holds a production meeting at the start of each class, and then sends students off to work on their projects.

"Most beginning classes do a birdhouse," Mattson said. "We start out making a cabinet."

The interest in cabinetmaking at North Salem is off the charts, because word is spreading about the training offered and the opportunities presented.

More than 500 students have [signed up](#) for classes next year, including some from other schools in Salem-Keizer School District who are seeking a transfer because their school doesn't offer a woodworking program.

Mattson has room in his six classes for only 240 students, which means more than half of the hopefuls will be turned away.

Joe Wadsworth, founder and vice president of Custom Source Woodworking, obviously is impressed with the program. He is, after all, hiring some of these kids.

"What Dean is training, and what he's teaching in work ethic and integrity, that's what we're looking for," Wadsworth said.

Wadsworth had been looking to partner with a high school that was aggressively training students for a career in the industry. When he heard Mattson speak last fall at a woodworking conference, about his program and his students, Wadsworth knew that he had found it at North Salem.

Custom Source Woodworking is a young, fast-growing company that has a reported \$6 million in annual sales. According to its website, it was founded in 2007 and is located in a new facility in Olympia that has more than 26,000 square feet and contains cutting-edge software and machines.

The company currently employs 40 people and works on a variety of projects, including schools, hospitals, museums, stores and restaurants.

Each North student was required to come into the interview with a completed job application, cover letter, resume and letters of recommendation.

Senior Josh Martin had a cover letter that Wadsworth said is one of the best he has ever seen. Senior Jacob Wood got Wadsworth's attention with a letter of recommendation from Mr. Mattson.

"These are pretty hard to come by," Wadsworth said. "It's only the second one I've seen. Nice."

Another student, junior Isaac Lucero, told Wadsworth that he already has two cabinet classes on his schedule for next year. And he admitted that he was probably more advanced in welding, the field in which his dad works, than woodworking.

Wadsworth talked to him about how the company likes versatility and urged Lucero to learn everything he could from his father.

"You have an excellent opportunity to be a star next year," Wadsworth said, "to be looked at by me as a future hire."

Back in the wood shop, senior Andrew White, wearing a blue shirt, dark-colored tie and slacks, told me what an awesome opportunity it was to get a job interview with Custom Source.

"I haven't ever heard of anybody or anything offering jobs like this to kids right out of high school," White said. "I'm excited to benefit from it."

Terrance Lucas is just a sophomore, but he was one of the lucky 60 or so students to be interviewed.

"If I could get a job like that it would be a life-changing opportunity," Lucas said.

Senior Jorge Rico, decked out in his JROTC uniform, was thankful for the opportunity to interview with the company. He is in his first semester in the program, and wishes he would have taken classes earlier.

"This is what I want to do after high school," Rico said. "It's a really fun job, you can make money at it, and you can fix your own house. It's something I would really like to do."

Rico will get that opportunity. He was one of the seniors Custom Source committed to hiring upon graduation.

Most of the equipment, a quarter-million dollar's worth, was donated. Some was purchased with grant money. Mattson has a \$3,500 annual budget for the program. His advanced students do commercial cabinet work, with proceeds returning directly to the program.

I've been told the starting wages for the Custom Source hires will be \$10 per hour, with the potential to earn upwards of \$30 per hour. The company also has indicated that it will help provide housing and financial assistance as the students work to establish themselves.

Wadsworth told Jacob Wood, one of the students interviewed, that he has been through 275 employees in five years, looking for just the right people.

"Do you think you can find the right people at North Salem?" Wood asked.

"I think I have an excellent opportunity to fill these positions," Wadsworth said. "Dean's teaching you right."

"Forward This" appears Wednesdays and Sundays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. Contact Capi Lynn at [clynn@StatesmanJournal.com](mailto:clynn@StatesmanJournal.com) or (503) 399-6710, or follow her at [Twitter.com/CapiLynn](https://twitter.com/CapiLynn)

Online

See this column at [StatesmanJournal.com/Capi](http://StatesmanJournal.com/Capi) for a photo gallery of students in the North Salem High cabinet manufacturing program.

Job candidates

Custom Source Woodworking of Olympia, Wash., has announced commitments to hire the following North Salem High School cabinet manufacturing and engineering students:

Nathaniel Eckle, senior

Josh Martin, senior

Casey Lee, senior

Jorge Rico, senior

Rider Allen, senior

Omar Ricaldy, senior

Noah Atkinson, sophomore

Chris Stewart, junior

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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