

Welding apprenticeship provides career pathway for local students

Vic Bode took measurements along a pair of stainless steel beams to make sure they were positioned correctly at Unison Solutions in Dubuque on Wednesday.

While quality control manager Justin Rouse straightened one of the beams into place, Bode performed quick welds down its length to form part of an I-beam.

“I love it,” said Bode, a senior at Dubuque Senior High School. “I love coming here in the morning. ... I love this environment



Bode is one of the first students participating in Dubuque Community Schools’ new registered apprenticeship in welding, through which she and her peers are working to earn a nationally recognized credential they can take into a career.

Through the apprenticeship, high school students have the chance to gain real-world career experience to help them determine their next steps after graduation.

“It’s the whole thing, meaning that they have coursework that trains them, then they have on-the-job training, and they get paid for it,” said David Moeller, the district’s educational support leader for career and technical education. “They’re getting the best of all those worlds.”

Bode started her apprenticeship at Unison Solutions over the summer, initially putting in 40 hours per week and then switching to 20 per week when the school year started.

She has learned to complete a variety of tasks, such as welding I-beams, using a forklift and crane, cutting metal and setting up welding equipment.

“I’m learning a lot of new stuff,” Bode said. “My welds have improved so much.”

Through the registered apprenticeship program, students in the Dubuque district can start out taking metals, manufacturing and welding courses in high school before working their way up to a college-level welding class during their junior year.

After that, they can be placed into apprenticeships with local businesses to complete about 2,000 hours of paid work.

“The idea is that, first and foremost, this gives them some very good, solid experience in high school in a career field that they’re interested in,” Moeller said.

Once they complete their hours and show competencies in the welding field, they earn a credential backed by the U.S. Department of Labor.

“They can use it at any place they apply, to say, ‘Here are the skills that I have, and here’s the experience that I’ve had,’” Moeller said.

Initially, three students are participating in the program, working at Unison Solutions and John Deere Dubuque Works, though Moeller has plans to grow the program in the coming year. He also is looking into the possibility of starting a diesel technician apprenticeship.

The district worked closely with Northeast Iowa Community College to develop the program, with the college providing curriculum for the educational component of the apprenticeship.

“It’s a great way ... for students who are very focused to get started in their vocational programming,” said Wendy Mihm-Herold, NICC vice president of business and community solutions.

Currently, 21 districts in Iowa host high school apprenticeship programs and a total of 34 districts participate in that programming, according to Iowa Workforce Development.

Dubuque Community Schools is the second local district to operate such a program, joining West Delaware County Community School District.

Nick Hauk, engineering and production manager for Unison Solutions, said the business is always looking for new welders, especially those who want to learn and be trained.

High-schoolers make good candidates because they don’t have predetermined notions of what the job is like, and they’re open to learning — a key part of the job.

They also get to learn all the parts of the job that might not be covered in the classroom.

“Hopefully, when they’re done, you’ve got someone who is interested in the business,” Hauk said.

Mark Onderick, labor relations manager at John Deere Dubuque Works, said the program helps get students into the workforce even sooner and exposes them to manufacturing jobs. That, in turn, helps ensure John Deere has people with needed skills to fill hiring needs.

Onderick said the two high school apprentices at John Deere have been doing well so far.

“To have some exposure to some real-world training ... has really energized them,” he said

There is a short YouTube Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoJICF44FSU&feature=emb_logo