

BOCES still honing the cutting edge

New programs and new facilities mean new hope for some communities
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The teaching staff at Tech Valley HS, from left, is Michelle Sweeny, math/physics; Stacia Snow, social studies; Leah Penniman, science; and Mary Van Hoomissen, English. They were chosen from more than 300 applicants for the new school.

Cutting edge would hardly describe what 11 brand-new BOCES began delivering in 1948, shortly after Gov. Thomas Dewey signed a school district reorganization bill that also authorized creation of "a Board of Cooperative Educational Services for the purpose of carrying out a program of shared educational services."

In a largely rural, postwar New York, those "shared educational services" consisted of little more than a few itinerant teachers and other professionals traveling to school districts too small to hire a full-time art or music teacher, a school nurse or a driver's ed instructor. But as the state's 37 BOCES look toward the 60th anniversary of the landmark legislation that led to their creation, much has changed. In this back-to-school week, BOCES across the state were making news in the communities they serve — marking the opening of classes by taking a lead role in the economic redevelopment of their communities, rebuilding and refitting facilities for training a 21st-century work force and even helping to reinvent high school.

Tech Valley innovation

Just 25 years ago, centralized academic services like summer schools and alternative high schools were off-limits to BOCES. This week, an innovative, BOCES-developed public high school opened in the Capital District to prepare students for careers in the emerging technologies that the region known as Tech Valley has been attracting with growing success.

Tech Valley High, a collaboration of Capital Region BOCES, Questar III BOCES and regional businesses, opened its doors to 40 academically diverse freshmen, equally divided by gender and selected by lottery from 138 applicants in the seven counties served by the two BOCES.

One grade will be added in each of the next three years, building out to a full enrollment of 400 students.

Unlike a charter school, this high school won't take revenue away from the school districts that make up the BOCES regions. Districts that enroll students at TVHS will receive BOCES aid as they do for other BOCES programs.

"We worked closely with organizers and legislators to assure Tech Valley High School would be created as a public high school, with students to be selected by lottery," said NYSUT Vice President Kathleen Donahue, whose office oversees BOCES issues for the union. The school's Regents-based curriculum focuses on emerging technologies; instruction will involve project-based learning — student teams participating in projects that take an interdisciplinary approach to math, science, social studies and English language arts.

"We were excited to be partners in the development of this unique school, which is designed to meet the needs of students and the region well into the future," said NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira. She served on the school's advisory board with NYSUT Board member Tony McCann.

Partners from business, higher ed, labor and government will help develop projects and serve as mentors and field experts. To prepare for their new learning environment, incoming freshmen spent part of the summer studying "teamwork."

Graduates will receive a Regents Diploma from their home district, with an endorsement indicating completion of the Tech Valley program. All will graduate with college credits through articulation agreements that are being negotiated with local colleges and universities.

School officials expect to accomplish these educational goals in a traditional school day and school year.

Operating for now out of converted office space at a Rensselaer County technology park, the school is administered by a board of education representing the two BOCES. It's one of more than two dozen similar schools around the country funded through a grant from California's New Technology Foundation.

NTF is providing access to its curriculum database and much of the professional development for the four teachers who have been hired for the incoming freshman class.

The foursome spent part of their summer in training that included visits to NTF schools in California and Indiana.

The school expects to become a regional source of professional development, particularly in project-based learning.

"It's our hope and desire that teachers will want to come and visit us and maybe their districts will see what we're doing and take pieces of it back with them," said social studies teacher Stacia Snow, one of the four teachers selected from more than 300 applicants. All are employed by Tech Valley High, along with a school counselor.

In a more traditional role, the two partnering BOCES will provide itinerant teachers for art and physical education, as well as courses in mandarin Chinese.

Building for the future

While the shared teacher remains a key service that BOCES still provide component districts, the nature of BOCES services was changing by the end of the 1950s. The cooperatives were quickly finding their niche in specialized areas that most districts couldn't hope to provide by themselves, including vocational ed and services for students with disabilities.

But unlike the services provided by individuals traveling from district to district, these programs required students from geographically scattered districts be brought together at a central location. And while BOCES could lease buildings, they couldn't build or own the specialized facilities they really needed.

That changed in 1967, when the Legislature gave BOCES the authority to build and own their facilities if voters in the component districts approved. They could even finance the cost of these centers through the state Dormitory Authority.

Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES quickly became the first to take advantage of that watershed legislation, getting voter approval to construct a "temporary" center in Auburn to house the many new programs and services being developed for a growing student population.

Now, some 20 years beyond its projected life expectancy, the crumbling, undersized building is being replaced with a 192,000-square-foot BOCES center on a new 62-acre campus just outside Auburn in Cayuga County.

"They say when classes are in session it could take 10 minutes to walk from one end of the building to the other," said Jane Donahue, co-president of the Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES Teachers Association, during a summer tour of the center.

This week, some 900 students, faculty and staff are testing that 10-minute timetable as they settle in to a \$42 million complex that union solidarity helped build.

Working with NYSUT local unions in all nine of the component school districts, the union convinced voters in 2004 to approve construction of the much-needed facility.

The union ran radio, TV and newspaper ads and staffed phone banks provided by the Auburn TA. Itinerant professionals like Donahue, a speech therapist, talked up the project and sought support of component district teachers and staff as they traveled.

"We broke it down for voters into the cost per household in each district per year," said Jim Baker, co-president of the BOCES TA.

"That's what turned it around, when people saw how little it would really cost."

What voters are getting in return is the first BOCES facility in the state to meet the standards of the U.S. Green Building Council. Its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification program promotes state-of-the-art building design and technologies like the BOCES center's geothermal heating and cooling system.

Ninety percent of the classrooms and workspaces will have natural lighting.

With the promise of new facilities, many of the already-popular Career and Technical Education programs have waiting lists, including the culinary arts program that Baker has taught for 28 years.

Flying high

The economic fortunes of Clinton County and Oneida County were tied closely to a pair of Air Force bases that were deactivated in a round of military base closings in 1995.

But with the help of BOCES, aviation is again poised to be the nexus for growth in these two economically hard-hit regions.

This week, a dozen students at Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES and Madison-Oneida BOCES began their senior year in a new program that will earn them Federal Aviation Administration certification, and nine college credits, as Airframe & Powerplant technicians. They will complete the three-semester program as students at Mohawk Valley Community College.

MVCC's Walt Constantini, the program director, expects most of the new technicians will sign on locally with his former employer, Empire Aero Center. The aircraft maintenance and repair company has been growing as fast as it can find trained technicians since locating in 2004 at the business and technology park on the site of the former Griffiss Air Force Base, just outside of Utica.

"Finding labor has been their biggest holdup to expanding," Constantini said. "It's worth it for a company like Empire to partner with BOCES and community colleges to create schools locally for training so they have a steady flow of people to draw from."

Diana Giffune, president of Oneida County BOCES TA, said the new program fit well with existing BOCES "bridge" programs that let students earn credits toward a degree or certificate program at MVCC while in high school.

"Our staff is committed to providing programs to answer the area's industrial needs," she said.

On Long Island, graduates of FAA-certified A&P training programs offered through Nassau and Eastern and Western Suffolk BOCES have long found employment prospects at the three metro airports and six regional airports on the Island.

Meanwhile, not far from the Canadian border, BOCES veteran Jim McCartney is pulling together the elements of a BOCES/college program to train students and adults in an Airframe & Power-plant curriculum that must meet Canadian as well as FAA regulations. Last year, Canadian-owned Laurentian Aerospace announced plans to build an aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul facility for wide-body aircraft at the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base, now home to the new Plattsburgh International Airport.

It's estimated Laurentian will need 1,500 new maintenance professionals over the next five years, a task that will fall to the Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute.

PAI is a partnership of Clinton Community College and Champlain Valley Educational Services, the BOCES known as CVES that serves four counties along the northeastern border of New York state.

With hangars and quonset huts full of aircraft, engines and other equipment needed for the hands-on training, "We have had incredible success so far obtaining what we need to get started," said McCartney. PAI's coordinator, he's a member of CVES United Professionals, the BOCES local.

By one recent estimate, the institute has received more than \$22.5 million in equipment, services, grants and other contributions from lawmakers, government agencies and businesses.

"BOCES facilities and their forward-thinking staff take great pride in their flexibility and their capacity to respond to community needs and help boost the regional economy," said NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi.

NYSUT's Donahue said the many new programs and facilities are a product of NYSUT's legislative strength in securing and preserving BOCES funding throughout its history.

"They are a reminder to our legislators and taxpayers of the value of BOCES in communities all across the state," she said.

— John Strachan

Milestones for BOCES

1948 - Gov. Thomas Dewey signs a bill giving small school districts the ability to combine their purchasing power by forming a "Board of Cooperative Educational Services" to share the costs of services and programs that would be too costly or impractical to provide by themselves.

1955 - Larger, independent school districts are authorized to become BOCES members.

1960 - The number of individual BOCES around the state reaches 82. Many will merge in the coming years.

1963 - Small-city school districts, for the first time, are permitted to join a BOCES.

1967 - Individual BOCES are authorized to build and own their facilities. This clears the way to develop centralized programs such as Career and Technical Education and services for students with disabilities.

1983 - The Legislature adds centralized academic programs to the list of shared services that BOCES can provide their component districts. This opens the way to offering such programs as summer school and alternative high schools.

2007 - The state's 37 BOCES comprise all but nine of the state's more than 700 school districts.

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