

# Talking shop

*Proponents of an Oregon bill hope to bring back vocational learning in schools*

BY NATHAN GILLES  
STAFF WRITER

In his left hand, high school senior John Theimer holds a shiny dial caliper. Using the engineering tool, which looks like a cross between a wrench and a pressure gauge, he makes very precise measurements of the toy car he's holding in his other hand. Part wood, part purple plastic, the car was made for easy disassembly into a series of discrete parts that, under Theimer's and other students' close inspection, are measured and recorded. He explains how it works.

"So basically we're reverse engineering it (the car)," says Theimer. "Measuring and drawing all the different pieces so we can put them in the computer program."

After that, he says they're going to improve on the design.

This is Carlie Harris' classroom at John F. Kennedy High School in the small rural town of Mt. Angel. All around students, huddled in groups of two and three, are reverse engineering their own tiny cars.

In a day when anemic education funding has forced schools to drop shop class and other hands-on learning courses, Harris and fellow Kennedy teacher Jeff Crapper have nonetheless managed to cobble together enough grant money for this and several other career-oriented classes at their school. One of these grants comes from a new state program that's currently up for renewal in the Oregon Senate, and program advocates in business and the skilled trades — metal workers, plumbers, and electricians, among others — have high hopes the program will extend the kind of hands-on learning that's happening in Harris' classroom to the rest of Oregon. That learning, they say, is sorely needed because much of the nation's skilled workforce is getting ready to retire. And they say it's a matter of equity because not everyone can or should go to college, but everyone deserves a decent wage.

"Sometimes I think because of the demise of shop classes," says Fred Streimer, president of Portland's Streimer Sheet Metal Works, "that students think unless they're going to college there's not really anything to do but flip hamburgers. ...They're not really picking up on the fact that there is a tremendous opportunity with good wages and benefits in the various trades."

The 68-year-old Streimer is a graduate of Portland's premier trade school, Benson Polytechnic High School, and has a thing or two to say about technical education and what's been lost. Since the 1940s his family-owned company has done metal work for some of Oregon's biggest businesses. The Great Recession hit it hard and that led to layoffs, but the company's hiring again. Only now there's another problem.

"We are having a little bit of a problem finding good candidates to come in and become apprentices," says Streimer.

Streimer puts the blame firmly on the decline — and in some cases the complete loss — of vocational training at public high schools and middle schools. And he's not the only one advocating for the return of shop classes. Educators and the skilled trades would also like to see shop classes and other vocational learning return to the state's high schools and middle schools. However, since Oregon's education coffers are notoriously tight right now, those pushing for change say it has to come incrementally, which is why they hope the Oregon senate will vote to continue and adequately fund the technical grant program.

The bill is Senate Bill 498. If passed, it will extend the state's relatively new Career and Technical Education Revitalization Grant Program. To date, the program, which came out of a 2011 Oregon House bill, has given approximately \$2 million in grant funds to eight Oregon school districts. This includes money that helped fund a program that got high school students internships with business, and one that extends vocational training programs with skilled trades. It also helped pay for electrical outlets, sinks, and gas lines for Harris and Crapper's science classrooms, as well as a renovation that created a training room for a sports medicine course Crapper teaches.

The two teachers say a legion of other grants paid for nearly everything else.

Grant program backers point to Kennedy and other recipients as proof that the program should be renewed, and adequately funded. And so far, things look good.

"It was all holding hands in the Capitol," says Oregon labor Commissioner Brad Avakian about lawmakers' support for SB 498. A former Oregon representative, Avakian, his Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI), and the coalition of Oregon business, labor and lawmakers he assembled are the political powerhouse behind the current bill and grant program. So far, Avakian's rallied the troops.

All 30 Oregon senators are sponsoring SB 498, as are all but three of Oregon's 60 state representatives.

Avakian told Street Roots he's very pleased to see the overwhelming support, because he says Oregon students have suffered due to the decline of shop classes, and he says there's an equity issue that's often overlooked. Minority students at Portland's schools have been disproportionately affected by the decline, he says.

"Portland Public Schools is an example," says Avakian. "It lost all of its (shop) programs from its middle schools and many from its high schools. And we know that urban centers are where most of our minority populations live."

Portland schools haven't received any technical grant money yet.

In 2012, Portland Public Schools did apply for a grant. The district's proposal would have expanded vocational programs at four Portland schools, including Benson. The state rejected the proposal.

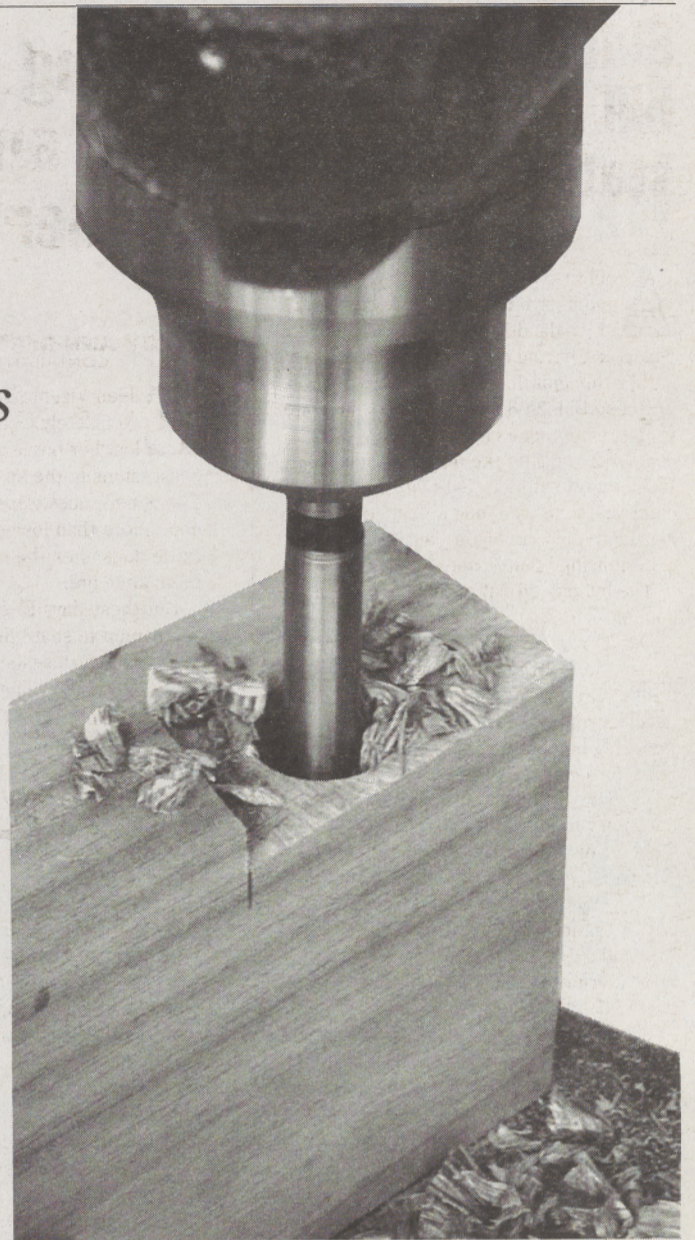
Jeanne Yerkovich, who oversees career technical learning for Portland schools, says the district will resubmit proposals once the grant program is running again.

"We intend to expand or bring back programs he had in the past," she says.

So what happens to students, especially the non-college bound, when shop classes disappear? Streimer says many of them "flounder" through their 20s, working low-paying jobs. The lucky ones, he says, eventually make it into the trades. Streimer says the average age of an apprentice at his shop is now around 27 years old, when decades ago it used to be around 19 years old.

An informal survey by Avakian's BOLI puts the number at 28.2 years old. But some say that's low-balling it.

"I think the average is closer to 30 or 35," says Willy Myers from the Sheet Metal Workers' Local 16. Myers is a trustee on the union's apprenticeship committee, which sends



its apprentices to work with journeymen at a number of Oregon businesses, including Streimer's.

The average age of a skilled journeyman is higher still. Roughly half the nation's skilled workers are 45 or older, and a little under half of these are at or near retirement age.

Yet Myers says he's not concerned about the current workforce's advanced years—largely, he admits, because many of his local's older members have already retired. Myers says he doesn't think a "skills gap" will hit when skilled boomers retire. Others involved in the trades aren't so sure.

"It's what everybody was worried about with the baby-boomer generation retiring," says Frank Wall. "But the reality is it's starting to happen."

Wall represents companies that contract with the plumbers and steamfitters at local UA 290. Like Streimer, he's also a Benson alumnus. Wall's seen the same trends as Streimer and Myers, and he suspects that many older workers — who had put off their retirement due to the bad economy — are now ready to retire. But he says their jobs won't be filled if education policy doesn't start recognizing that college isn't right for everyone.

"We've created a college prep mindset," says Wall. "We are just giving the wrong messages."

SB 498 is currently in the Ways and Means Committee, which has yet to set a dollar amount. Program proponents are asking for \$20 million for the next two years of funding, or roughly ten times the program's original funds. The actual number, say proponents, is likely to be somewhere in between. The vote is expected at the end of the legislative session.

Avakian says his plan is to pursue funding every two years over the next 10 years, so every Oregon school has a shot at restoring or creating new career technical programs. He admits a grant program wasn't his first choice to create this restoration, but says it's working.

"In a perfect world, if schools were fully funded and we didn't need to hand out grants, and we could immediately restore programs to every school, that would be the way to go," he says. "But we knew the state needed a period of time to ease its way into these restorations."