

Schools add auto courses as students seek trade jobs

By BRYCE DOLE
The Bulletin

Savannah Jessee has known for years that she wanted to become a mechanic.

The 17-year-old junior, who is on track to graduate from Crook County High School this year, grew up riding motorcycles and dirt bikes with her dad. She said she enjoys hands-on work and helping others, and after high school, she's heading to Florida to attend the Motorcycle Mechanics Institute. Her dream is to one day own her own shop.

So when Jessee learned about the high school's new internship at Kendall Ford of Prineville, where students learn about the various jobs at a dealership, she signed up. Alongside six other students and dealership employees, she starts each school day at 7:45 a.m. to learn about car maintenance, basic mechanics, changing oil, detailing and selling cars.

"I'd rather go to work and do something I enjoy for the rest of my life than go to a job that I don't enjoy and make more money," Jessee said.

The internship is meant to support a growing number of students seeking trade jobs post-high school instead of a four-year college education and helps address an ongoing labor shortage in the auto industry.

The program's goal is to teach aspects of the whole industry. Working with professionals, the students rotate to a new specialty every two weeks. When they're finished, they will receive a certificate that will allow them a head start as a master technician in the auto industry.

At least two rural school districts in central Oregon are starting new auto-focused courses to accommodate the demand among students for trade jobs and provide students with alternative routes to four-year colleges that sad-



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Crook County High School students, from left, Lucas Teskey and Wyatt Hammack work with express manager Trace Robison as they service a vehicle at the Kendall Ford of Prineville auto dealership.

dle many students with overwhelming debt.

Nationwide surveys portray a downward trend in college enrollment due to the pandemic. According to a November 2021 survey by the ECMC Group, a Minneapolis nonprofit that provides financial tools and services and career education and other programs for students, the number of high school students considering four-year higher education has declined since the pandemic started, dropping from 71% to 48%.

Ryan Cochran, the career and technical education workforce development coordinator at Crook County High School, said roughly 55% of the school's students are now choosing to pursue trade jobs over college, and he said that number is only growing.

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"We're in that upswing right now where (trade jobs) are pretty hot," Cochran said.

Robert Durfee, the regional manager for Kendall Auto Group, also said that with college enrollment declining, "trades are becoming more and more important." To help propel the program at Crook County High School, Kendall is covering costs of equipment, which typically soars into thousands of dollars. It is also providing

space for the course, employees to mentor students and an old Ford truck the students will fix up and sell. Program graduates also have potential to get hired at the dealership. In a region that has become a widely sought out workplace destination, causing home prices to spike and greater employment competition, Durfee sees hiring students through the course as a critical way to support local families.

"We're helping. We're giving back," he said. "That's the plan."

In Jefferson County, the school district obtained \$125,000 in state grant funding in February for a similar automotive class, according to Melinda Boyle, the director of curriculum and instruction for the district. The funds will go toward a new course that the district's two high schools hope to start next fall. Students in the course will learn how to conduct basic auto care, maintenance, oil changes, brake services, bookkeeping and much more.

The program was proposed by tribal officials from the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs who wanted programs that support future career opportunities for students. Among those who pushed for the program was

Val Switzler, the general manager for the tribes' education administration.

A need for auto workers opened up on the reservation after the closure of the tribes' own motor pool — an in-house facility where tribal enterprises could receive vehicle repairs for government cars and buses, Boyle said.

Indigenous communities in Oregon, too, have struggled to connect students with four-year colleges. A recent report from the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission showed that 88% of ninth-grade Native American and Alaska Native students surveyed did not get a college degree or certificate within six years of their high school graduation, compared to 77% for white students.

Boyle said career and technical education enrollment is increasing, but stopped short of saying this was a recent phenomenon. "I think students are looking for those higher wage and high-demand career pathways," she said.

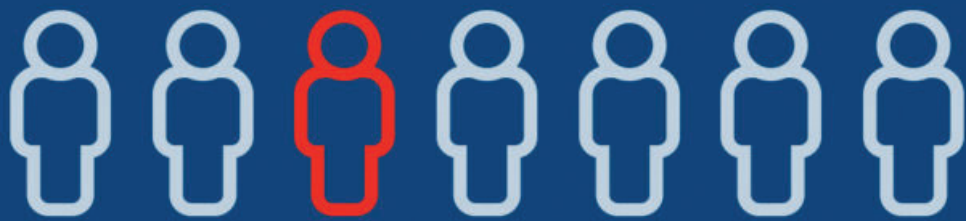
Jefferson County School District spokesperson Joey Prechtl said students involved in such programs are performing better academically, which follows statewide trends.

Wyatt Hammack, a 17-year-old junior at Crook County High School, is among the students pursuing his dream through the Kendall internship. He grew up working on cars with his brother and dad. When the opportunity to take the new course came along, he thought to himself, "This could be my whole life."

Since Monday, Hammack has been draining oil, changing oil filters, checking transmissions and taking off tires. By the end of the course, he hopes to be hired as a master technician at Kendall.

"I want to be as full of information and wisdom that they can give me," he said.

At least **1 IN 7 CHILDREN** have experienced abuse or neglect in the past year



#ChildAbusePreventionMonth

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html>



If I could say thank you to every foster family, child welfare professional, judge and CASA volunteer who dedicate their life to children and youth in the foster care system, I would. And, even then, it would insufficiently cover the depth and gratitude due them for their unwavering dedication, selflessness, and countless sacrifices day in and day out — to support children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Without you, these children might have no one to depend on. They'd be left with nothing more than a constant parade of strangers cycling in and out of their lives, asking the same questions and ticking the same boxes before disappearing, only to be replaced by the next.

Imagine experiencing this loneliness and chaos...on top of losing your parents.

It's a loss too terrible for anyone to bear, much less a child.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month and today, I am reaching out about a REAL and PRESENT crisis affecting children here in Clatsop County and across the nation. If you read the paper or watch the news, you know the **magnitude of the opioid epidemic** in this country. With the additional devastation of COVID-19, our communities are facing an uphill battle. This is especially true in small communities like ours. While lawmakers, public officials, and the media focus on these public health crises, we focus on the silent victims — **the children.**

Of course, parental substance abuse is not new, and we have always advocated for the best interests of children who have experienced abuse or neglect because of a parent's addiction. But over

the last six years, the number of children in foster care across the country has risen 8 percent, a rise that public health officials, analyzing other data trends, increasingly attribute to the growing use of opioids. **Sadly, we have expected this number to continue to climb.** And this was before the COVID-19 Pandemic — these numbers are expected to increase dramatically because of family isolation, anxiety/stress, lack of access to treatment and economic uncertainty.

If this breaks your heart, you are not alone.

It breaks mine, too. And what's worse is that this wave will not peak any time soon. If we want to save our children, we have to act now. Which means our role — and yours — has never been more important.

I am writing to ask for your assistance. As an important part of the CASA movement, you can

Historically, financial and emotional **STRESS** can fuel a **RISE IN CASES OF CHILD ABUSE**



#ChildAbusePreventionMonth



help bring stability to the lives of the lesser known victims of the opioid crisis, America's children.

First, it takes time.

Right now, more than 40 volunteers spend 4,000 plus hours a year speaking out for the best interests of the more than 120 children they serve here in Clatsop County. To give every child one caring, constant adult in their lives, we need to more than double the number of CASA volunteers. We know we can do it.

Second, it takes money.

The 4,000-plus hours our volunteers donate each year in our community is a bargain, but it is not free. What makes our volunteers so effective is the investment that we make in their ongoing training and supervision. The issues surrounding opioid addiction are complex. We need to create new trainings and new materials on those issues for all our volunteers. Given the return — to the children in foster care and to our society — we are committed to partnering with donors and investors who can help us make that investment. Please consider a tax-deductible donation to our program. Donations can be made at www.clatsopcasa.org or mailed to: PO BOX 514, Astoria, OR 97103.

Third, it takes HEART.

It takes heart to see a child in need and stop to help. It takes heart to stay for as long as you are needed — for that child and every child — day after day, year after year, in good times and bad. Those who do this work, whether they are volunteers, staff members, or donors, have the heart to see, to stop, and to stay.

Perhaps you do, too. And if you do, this is an invitation to join us, in whatever capacity you can. Not even one of us has the power to change these children's past — what they have seen, what they have done, what they have suffered.

Every one of us has the power to change their future. All it takes is the heart to do so.

I can tell you that whatever dollars you invest will yield an outsized return in that most valuable currency of all, **time.**

I can promise you that wherever that time is spent — in court, on the phone, at a hospital, in a high school gymnasium or backyard sandbox — you will be giving children all the time they need to learn that it's safe to hope, to trust, to believe, and to move forward.

On behalf of all of us — **thank you.**

Sincerely,
Nakesha Womble
Executive Director, Clatsop
CASA Program, Inc.