



# Teenagers in need of direction can turn to apprenticeships

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By [Mary Beth Marklein](#), USA TODAY

EAGLE, Wis. — Only after he put his hands to metal on a factory floor did Jordan Vail begin to grasp the point of math, communications and other skills he was supposed to be learning in high school but wasn't.

"It helps me a heck of a lot more to see how (what I'm doing) is translating to actual life instead of sitting in a lecture," says Vail, 18. He was barely getting through high school when he landed an opportunity to combine classroom learning with paid, on-the-job training at Generac Power Systems, which builds standby generators.

The opportunity came as part of Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program, founded in 1991 to prepare non-college-bound high school students for jobs after graduation. The program also attracts college-bound students who want to explore careers, and as jobs have grown more technical over the years, participants are increasingly pursuing more education. But the mission to reach struggling high-schoolers remains at the forefront.

"We are able to reach a lot of really smart students who may be feeling a little lost in this college-prep world and who don't understand that there are really good opportunities out there," says Wisconsin Gov. [Jim Doyle](#). "We all know young people" who fit that description.

Students who complete the program earn a high school diploma, a certificate of occupational proficiency and, in some cases, credit for post-high school training programs.

## Benefits for employers, too

The program also helps the state meet workplace needs in critical fields, including health, agriculture, finance and automotive technology.

About one of every six workers is in manufacturing, for example. Even with plant closings, younger workers are needed to replace older ones, says Eric Grosso, senior economist with the state's Department of Workforce Development.

That's one reason Generac began offering apprenticeships in 1996. It wanted to hire recent high school graduates but found that many applicants lacked basic academic skills, as well as softer skills such as punctuality and teamwork.

"We've created a very black hole for people coming into these jobs," says Dawn Tabat, Generac's chief operations officer. "There was nobody representing manufacturing in high school. No one really understands how to prepare students for the school-to-work transition."

Apprenticeships vary widely. Generac works with Second Chance Partners in Education, a non-profit serving kids who struggle in a traditional classroom. Vail and three other Generac apprentices

spend two hours weekday mornings with an instructor, who designs lessons that complement their workplace duties. They spend an additional six hours each day at the plant.

Vail says he likes the hands-on work with mentor Bob Jacobson, a 13-year veteran. "On my first day, he's like, 'I'm going to sit back and tell you what to do, but you're going to do it yourself.' "

Vail also learned what it feels like to take pride in accomplishment.

"In high school, quality was the last thing on my mind," he says. Grades "were nothing more than a joke to me."

Advocates for high school reform say that's what an apprenticeship should do. Though the focus is learning a trade, "what it really does is teach kids how much people need to know, or how hard they

need to work, to get good at something specific," says Robert Halpern, author of *The Means to Grow Up: Reinventing Apprenticeship as a Developmental Support in Adolescence*.

The concept has shown promise at a small but growing number of high schools, but it has not caught on in a big way, Halpern says. Though President Obama has mentioned apprenticeships as one path toward career readiness, workforce training in general remains a relatively low priority. Obama's 2010 budget calls for \$3.7 billion in workforce training, compared with \$173 billion in loans, grants, tax credits and work-study programs.

### **Success in the numbers**

Even in Wisconsin, which Halpern says runs the most successful state apprenticeship, legislative support has been spotty.

Regardless, state officials say the program has transformed lives. Nearly 13,000 youths and about 8,000 employers have participated over the years. Nearly nine out of 10 graduates are offered jobs, a 2004 survey of recent graduates show. Of those, about 44% go to work full time and 43% work part time. About eight of 10 graduates, meanwhile, go on to either a four-year college or technical school.

Vail, who is on track to graduate high school this spring, has been accepted into a two-year automotive and diesel technician program at [Universal Technical Institute](#) in Glendale Heights, Ill.

Just a few years ago, he says, he would never have considered applying. Had it not been for his apprenticeship, he says, "I probably would have been flipping burgers."

