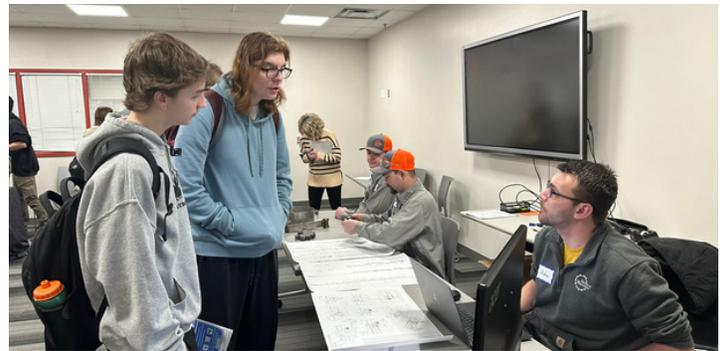


Opening Doors to Opportunity at Experience the Trades



Waconia has undoubtedly changed throughout the years; schools have been built, new families have moved in, and businesses now fill the space where grass once grew, but one thing that's remained the same is Waconia's unwavering commitment to, and support of, the community, especially its youth. We see it in the fundraisers, in the championing of quality education and it's readily apparent in the multitude of local gatherings that aim to bring people together and cultivate a sense of belonging. So, four years ago when the opportunity presented itself to connect curious young people with successful local industry partners, and Waconia rose to the occasion... well... nobody was surprised.



On the morning of January 24th at Waconia High School, a steady stream of eager and inquisitive high school students filled room B107 along with 13 local industry partners for the 4th annual Experience the Trades. This meet-and-greet style event is put on by the Waconia Chamber of Commerce in partnership with Waconia Public Schools and is an opportunity for students grades 9-12 to shake the hands of local business owners in the manufacturing, automotive, construction, and engineering industries. They have the chance to ask questions, make connections, and learn about alternate paths their lives, and careers can take them.



Mike Lovich, Head of Operations and Implementation at **Laketown Electric Corporation** says that students who attend this event are generally interested in learning about possible internships, what a typical day is like in that specific field, and what skills or traits would benefit them in the area that has captured their interest. The hope is that the students walk away with newfound understanding and a fresh sense of enthusiasm; but they aren't the only ones who find value in these new connections. "It usually takes about four to five years to get your trade license, so to continue to keep that steady flow of employees going is very important for us," Mike explains. And the advantages of forging these relationships locally are priceless.



"Here students can get a window into what life without college could look like," Chris Beckwith, General Manager of **Waconia 1 Collision Auto** commented. "They can see that they can make a good living without breaking the bank."



He also emphasized the importance of giving these students the chance to explore various industries, some they may know little about. This exposure helps them understand what these jobs entail, and potential next steps if they're interested in moving forward. Waconia High School teacher, Michael Jensen, agrees. "I wish I wouldn't have known all of this existed when I was in high school. In these industries, you can be proud of what you made. You can see something and say, "I made that!"

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Devin Beilke, a 2022 Waconia High School graduate, is currently a plumber's apprentice for **Crimson Copper Plumbing**, a local business who also represented their industry at Experience the Trades. He met the owner, Mike Wickenhauser, through a friend and soon began shadowing and learning the ropes... er pipes. While Devin didn't attend the event in his high school years, he recognizes the importance of students discovering what lies beyond traditional education.

"I would say learn what's out there and try a few different things to find out what you like. I love my job. It's fun, physical, and it keeps my mind busy," Devin shares. Waconia Works Signing Day, also in its 4th year, is one Devin did participate in back in 2022. Think of signing day for sports but without the sports. This celebration highlights students who are entering the workforce in the trades or manufacturing industries, as well as the local company they'll be joining.

In the bustling classroom an hour before school began, introductions were made, information was shared, and seeds were planted. Phrases like, "I'm not sure what I want to do," and "Where do I start?" were uttered followed by encouraging and excited responses that included words like "opportunities", "learning", "possibilities", and "successful." One sophomore said it best, "I loved this. I learned a lot and I'll be back next year." And lucky for these students, so will Waconia.

