

Auto shop gets tech savvy

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Not long ago auto mechanics were simply mechanics, but technology has quickly turned vehicles into computers on wheels and, consequently, the automotive field has become increasingly specialized.

Nationwide, the demand for qualified technicians far out-weighs the supply.

Still, many students are graduating from local high schools without the knowledge to easily slip into a technical field.

Locally, Imperial Valley College and Central Union and Calexico high schools are the only schools that offer auto body courses.

When faced with budget cuts, school districts tend to cut vocational education programs such as auto shop, wood shop and welding because districts are not required by the state to offer those courses — a move Ron Shane says is a mistake.

"We can't afford to get rid of some of these because of the need," said Shane, Central Union High School's auto body shop teacher.

"If we drop some of these programs," he said, where will the nation find its auto mechanics? He added this country can't outsource such skilled positions from other countries.

Some administrators don't realize that students taking auto body classes are learning a variety of disciplines — such as math, computers, reading comprehension — and applying them everyday.

"I think it's important to remember that some of our kids are past the ultimate standard — they're employable," said Shane, referring to the teaching standards required by the California Department of Education.

General Motors will need an extra 35,000 auto technicians nationwide within the next couple years because of the growing automobile industry, said Shane.

Other schools may be cutting auto body, but the program is alive and kicking at Central, and Shane is working to ensure that every student who participates in his class graduates high school with an expert knowledge of the automotive field.

His first step in that direction was to attain the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation certification. The certification is to automotive teaching programs what the Western Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation is to high school academic programs.

NATEF certification is only awarded to high school, community college or trade school auto programs that pass a series of standards set by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence.

Central's program earned certification — which expires in March 2008 — in brakes and electronic or electrical systems.

Certification opens up a whole new world for Shane's students.

Local dealerships have donated four brand new cars to the program — a move they wouldn't have made if the auto shop lacked NATEF certification.

Additionally, local dealerships including El Centro Motors, Direct Auto Plaza and Rogers & Rogers Nissan and Toyota are employing Central students as summer interns.

Paul Boss, director of parts and services for Direct Auto Plaza in El Centro, said the six-month internship he's spearheading is beneficial to both businesses and students.

"It helps us out too because that's where I'll be looking for employees in the future," Boss said. "There's a national shortage for trained technicians right now."

Boss, who ran a similar apprentice program at a dealership in El Paso, Texas, said he thinks the internship will help alleviate the shortage.

Further, since the field is more specialized, students will leave high school knowing more than just how to change the oil.

"Just like a doctor they've got to diagnose the vehicle," he said.

Rosalio Gomez will begin his internship with Direct Auto Plaza in June.

When he graduates from high school, the 16-year-old CUHS junior plans to attend Universal Technical Institute and earn a certificate in engine performance and steering suspension.