

# Business

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'CONNECTICUT IS REALLY ON THE CUTTING EDGE'

## Filling in a training gap

By Dirk Perrefort

DANBURY — Locally developed programs to address the ongoing need for a skilled workforce in manufacturing are “cutting edge,” and a model for the rest of the country to follow, a top federal labor official visiting Danbury said Tuesday.

“I was really wowed,” Christopher Lu, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, said at Henry Abbott Technical High School. “Connecticut is really on the cutting edge. The leveraging of under-utilized state resources as part of the program is brilliant.”

Last week, Naugatuck Valley Community College launched an advanced manufacturing program that uses the high school’s shop during the evening hours when the school is usu-

ally closed. The program was funded as part of a \$15 million grant the state received from the Labor Department to address the need for a skilled manufacturing workers in light of an aging workforce.

Similar programs launched in other areas of the state have a 90 percent job placement rate after graduation, according to Daisy Cocco De Filippis, president of the college. De Filippis and about a dozen other officials from around the state held a roundtable discussion with Lu on Tuesday at Abbott Tech to talk about a growing labor force gap and efforts to address it.

“This is the only model of its kind in the nation,” said Nivea L. Torres, superintendent of the state’s technical high schools. “If we want to be competitive in the future we need to have

a skilled workforce. It’s our hope to expand the manufacturing programs across the state in the next three years.”

U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, D-Conn., and others spoke during the meeting about the need to change the public’s perception about careers in manufacturing. “There is a real misconception about modern-day manufacturing,” Esty said. “These are high-caliber jobs that can provide security and future career opportunities.”

Several manufacturing students at Abbott Tech, including Ben MacNicholl, 17, of Danbury, said they plan to go to college for a degree in engineering. More than half of the school’s students go on to a post-secondary education. MacNicholl said he had planned to attend Danbury High School when he attended an open house at Abbott Tech and fell

in love with the manufacturing program. “I love to build stuff,” he said.

While some relatives tried to steer him away from a technical education, MacNicholl said he believes it’s the best choice for a career in engineering. “Having manufacturing skills means I’ll be one step ahead of the rest,” MacNicholl said. “When I’m creating a (blue) print, I can simplify it because I already know what the floor needs.”

Vinnie Valente, program manager for the state’s Office of Apprenticeship Training, said more than 62 percent of today’s manufacturing workforce are 55 years of age or older.

“What some people call a skills gap I call a training gap,” Valente said. “And the best way to transfer skills to the next generation is through apprenticeships.”



U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, D-Conn., and Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor Christopher Lu, tour Henry Abbott Technical School on Tuesday with, among others, school Principal Stacy L. Butkus, right. The tour was followed by a roundtable discussion highlighting a new manufacturing partnership between Naugatuck Valley Community College’s Danbury campus and Abbott Below. Ben MacNicholl, 17, right, a student in the manufacturing technology department of Abbott Tech, explains his duties.

Carol Kaliff/Staff photographer

