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Advice to high schools from Connecticut manufacturers desperate to fill jobs: steer students away from college



U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta (left), U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy (center) and Gov. Ned Lamont participated Tuesday in a meeting with education officials, business representatives and others about how best to fill manufacturing jobs in eastern Connecticut. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

By STEPHEN SINGER

Employers seeking to fill skilled, well-paid manufacturing jobs are urging high schools to steer students toward vocational training and away from liberal arts colleges, eastern Connecticut manufacturers told U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta in a visit Tuesday.

Electric Boat, the region's manufacturing giant, is looking to fill about 900 jobs in Connecticut this year and thousands more in the decade ahead. Scores of suppliers, many that are family owned machine shops, also are looking for workers.

Elected officials, business owners and executives, representatives of community colleges and vocational schools, union leaders and others told Acosta at a meeting in Uncasville that the Eastern Workforce Investment Board and its manufacturing pipeline are successfully training prospective workers who quickly find employment in manufacturing.

The manufacturing jobs pipeline "gives exposure to that individual to say, 'Hey, I can earn a living, I can provide a kid my piece of the American dream without going to college,' " said Raymond Coombs, president of Westminster Tool Inc. in Plainfield.

Chris Jewell, chief financial officer of Collins & Jewell Co., a Bozrah manufacturer and contractor for Electric Boat, said high schools are now offering "job signings" instead of "college signings."

“We’re actually getting superintendents, we’re getting principals, we’re getting guidance counselors to realize that they have a segment of their population that they’re not serving and this is an opportunity to service that segment of their population, the non-college bound kids," Jewell said.

State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, said an effort is needed to “retrain our high school guidance counselors to not just have pictures of colleges, but to have pictures of the jobs" available at Electric Boat and other manufacturers.

U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy said the manufacturing jobs initiative is not partisan and is embraced across eastern Connecticut as a way to promote economic growth.

“This is an initiative that enjoys broad public sector, private sector, Republican, Democratic support," he said. "We’re all in.”

President Donald Trump’s Pentagon budget, released last month, would increase Electric Boat’s production of Virginia-class submarines from two to three next year. U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal called it a “major breakthrough.”

Acosta said community colleges, such as Quinebaug Valley Community College, are leading the U.S. by partnering with business in “demand-driven education,” or working with business to determine curriculum.

“We need the educational partners and the business partners to talk to, to communicate the skill that is being demanded in the workplace,” Acosta said.

Patrick Walton, 20, a welder at Collins & Jewell, said in an interview after the discussion

Blumenthal, Murphy and other senators have asked Republican Senate leaders to commit $680 million for states to provide “intensive re-employment services” and no less than $250 million for apprenticeships.

Electric Boat, a unit of General Dynamics Corp. benefiting from U.S. military strategy that’s turning to the oceans to check Russian and Chinese ambitions, surpassed 17,000 employees for the first time since 1992, up by 1,000 last year, Jeffrey Geiger, the company’s president, said in January. Of that, about 12,000 are in Connecticut. It hired 2,241 workers last year and expects to bring on a total of 1,400 this year, with 500 in Quonset Point, R.I., in addition to the 900 in Connecticut.

Employment is expected to reach 20,000 in the decade of the 2020s, Geiger said.

Electric Boat is building two Virginia-class attack submarines a year and is designing the ballistic Columbia-class submarines, replacing the aging Ohio-class subs.