

Georgia Students Find Out Where the Jobs Are at CEFGA CareerExpo

By Patti Ghezzi

High school students from around Georgia spilled out of school buses and into an arena brimming with job opportunities.

“I’m hoping to learn more about building, about what goes on behind the walls,” said Anthony Brown, a 17-year-old junior from Crim High School in Atlanta. “And I’m hoping to get a job.”

The Third Annual CEFGA Career Expo & SkillsUSA Championships drew more than 3,000 participants and 150 companies on April 26 and 27 to the Gwinnett County Fairgrounds. This year, 92 schools attended the expo, up from 50 the first year.

“Every year it grows,” said Scott Shelar, Executive Director of the CEFGA, the Construction Education Foundation of Georgia, which organizes the Expo.



Employers set up hands-on activities where students could operate large pieces of heavy equipment, get hooked into a harness or practice swinging a hammer or pouring concrete. Students also got a chance to paint cabinets or lay bricks. Other companies reached students through their stomachs, handing out popcorn, snow cones and cotton candy.

“I hope to get some employees,” said Dena Wilburn, Human Resources Director for Excel Electrical Technologies, who attracted students by raffling off a Circuit City gift certificate. “I hope to get some summer interns, and we would love to have them sign on for four years.”



Steve Bonner, General Superintendent for Excel, noted that the company was looking for entry-level candidates. “A little bit of math and a little bit of common sense, and you’ll do great.”

Companies came not just to recruit employees, but also to promote the construction industry. Many said they worry that today’s young people favor careers in computers over carpentry, heating and air conditioning and other trades. Yet the construction industry is booming in Georgia, offering good salaries and working conditions for young people willing to get to work on time, work hard, and learn fast.

Teachers said high school graduates often head to more social settings like a retail store in the mall or a restaurant. Later, those students realize how lucrative the construction industry is. The median age for an apprentice is 29, something employers would like to change by recruiting employees at a younger age.

At McKenney's Inc., a mechanical contracting and engineering company, superintendents are looking for self-starters. "It's not a fit for everybody," said Ralph Blessing, Corporate Safety Director. "There are cool days and hot days, and there's a lot of responsibility."

Blessing got students' attention when he showed them pictures of the Georgia Aquarium, a McKenney's project. "Just about any building you see downtown has a McKenney's stamp on it," he told several students.

Ellen Jones and Chandra Moore, both 17-year-old seniors from Douglass High School in Atlanta, said they want to get into project management. "We're trying to get a feel for it," said Chandra. "We want to know what kind of salaries we can expect and what kind of experience employers are looking for."

The young women impressed everyone they met with their firm handshakes and specific questions.

"We've met some really sharp kids!" said Phil Greeves of JAMCO, Johnson Architectural Metal Company. "It's great that CEFGA is doing this. It's hard to find young people who want to find a trade and come to work."

One of the students Greeves met was Andrew Boyd, an 18-year-old senior from Lamar County. "I was just getting an idea of what I can do in terms of a career," he said. "They've got a lot of stuff to choose from. I'm really interested in sheet metal and welding."



Joshua Gregory, an assistant project manager at Batson-Cook Construction, noted that the president of the company started out as a field engineer and worked his way to the top. “The industry is so varied and there is so much diversity,” he said. “We’re just looking for someone with a commitment to work hard. If you want to learn something new every day, this is the place to be.”

Several companies helped with the Expo through donations. White Cap Construction Supply donated 3,000 pairs of safety glasses. “We’re happy to do our part and support such a positive event,” said Welton Pruitt, a safety product specialist.



Each student also got a book bag and a hard hat. Companies handed out stickers for students to put on their hats.

Teachers said the event gives students a chance to see what they’ve been learning about in the classroom.

“I hope my students enjoy themselves,” said Barney Poole, a teacher at Mary Persons High School in Monroe County. “I also hope they see how large the construction industry is. In a small town, a lot of them see only the ‘mom and pop’ companies.”

Tony Shore of Maxwell High School of Technology in Gwinnett County brought his students in construction. “Some of the kids come into the classes knowing exactly what they want to do with their lives,” he said. “They are the ones who keep teachers in the business, and this experience for them is awesome.”

Shore said he appreciated CEFGA and the industry representatives that worked hard to make the event a success. “They are giving of themselves today,” he said, “so these young people can make decisions that affect their future. “