

# Technical centers play part in plan for economic growth

## Regions finding ways to boost average income

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CRAWFORD COUNTY, Kan., and AFTON, Okla. — Seventeen-year-old Dylan Powell's morning began as it usually does — by wheeling a 200-pound MIG welder and a tank of argon-blend gas across the concrete floor of a repurposed industrial building.

He parked the equipment by one of eight cinderblock booths where high-schoolers learn welding, clamped a grounding wire to the booth's wall and plugged the machine in.

By 7:45 a.m., sparks were visible through the translucent red of the booth's thick plastic curtain. Clad in a protective jacket and hood, Powell fed metal wire from his welding gun along two sheets of steel, fusing them.

"When I weld this," the high school junior said, pausing to explain the vertical joint taking shape, "it forms a current. You can see it's electric."

This is Powell's second semester learning welding in a building in Pittsburg that once was owned by a PVC pipe manufacturer. The building now houses a technical center for seven rural and town high schools, mostly in Crawford County, but also neighboring Cherokee County.

Statewide, Kansas Board of Regents data indicate rural and town students are more likely than their peers in cities and suburbs to take advantage of an initiative launched in 2012 that offers all Kansas high-schoolers tuition-free access to post-secondary-level career and technical classes.

Though schools sometimes face hurdles to meeting the demand and interest among students for these programs, here they are sidestepping those by consolidating resources at a 30,000-square-foot building, with help from city and county officials, Fort Scott Community College and philanthropists.

Supporters of this facility, called the Southeast Kansas Career and Technical Education Center, see it as part of a regional plan to bolster economic growth in a corner of the state where household earnings lag behind the Kansas median. The hope is to attract more businesses to the area and connect students with jobs.

"The kids in this community, they need this as much as the businesses need it," said Daron Hall, city manager for Pittsburg, population 20,000. "As much as the community itself needs it."

### **College or career-ready**

Powell was one of about three dozen students at the tech center this February morning learning masonry, carpentry or welding.

Fourteen were in his class. They worked independently as their instructor, Davis Oehme, stood

nearby, ready to pull on his welding hood and step into the booths for one-on-one tutorials.

“It’s just like any other trade,” said Oehme, who worked in the field for 12 years before teaching. “The more you do it, the better you’re going to be.”

Crawford County already had an option for students interested in college — the 8,000-student Pittsburg State University, which primarily offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

But it lacked a center like this one, where high-schoolers and adults alike could train for careers such as welding, which often require trade-specific credentials.

Powell, who attends rural Southeast High, a 230-student school tucked among rolling hills and scattered groves about 12 miles outside Pittsburg, said he appreciates having this option.

“First thing I did when I heard about it was sign up — and I’m definitely going to recommend it to the younger classes,” he said. “This will give me a base certification, which will put me a cut above the average worker.”

Though he learned basic welding in an agriculture class at Southeast, here he studies industry methods and can pursue three American Welding Society certifications for various techniques before graduation.

If he passes the AWS tests, any employer will be able to verify his skills on that organization’s website.

As a high-schooler, these classes are free for Powell, meaning he saves upwards of \$3,000, which it would cost him to start this training after high school instead — tuition and fees he said would be difficult to afford.

“I don’t come from a very wealthy family,” he said. “It would break us.”

## **Economic development**

The scores of water-filled strip pits that stripe Crawford and Cherokee counties attest to the booming coal and mineral-mining industry that flourished in this area for a century before drying up in the 1970s.

About 10 miles from Powell’s high school stands Big Brutus, a 15-story-tall, 5,000-ton retired electric shovel believed to be the largest in existence. Today a countryside museum, it could once move 150 tons of earth in a single scoop.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate this area trails behind much of the state in earnings. The median household income in Crawford was \$37,400 in 2013, about \$14,000 below the statewide figure. One in five residents lives in poverty.

There are signs, though, that the economy in Crawford has picked up.

Michael Davidsson, an economist at Pittsburg State, said job growth there between 2011 and 2014 outpaced Kansas and the U.S. Unemployment has fallen and the county has a high rate of people working — 60 percent of its population, compared to 57 percent nationwide. That, he says, indicates a motivated workforce poised to see better earnings if the area attracts more jobs with higher pay.

Davidsson believes this is likely to occur, particularly if the Kansas Department of Transportation expands K-69 highway in this area to four lanes as planned.

“What’s going to happen is we’re going to get a lot more manufacturing,” he said. “And manufacturing here pays like 20.9 percent higher than average wages, so these are usually good jobs.”

Crawford County Commissioner Carl Wood sees the tech center as another piece of the puzzle. In the past, Wood said he has seen companies decline to locate there because of a shortage of skilled workers.

“They asked for the workforce,” Wood said. “We didn’t have the workforce.”

He isn’t alone in that thinking. For years, local educators and businesses have wanted to see better opportunities for residents to study trades and careers.

Visits to other towns and cities sharpened their conviction. Among those was a trip to Northeast Technology Center in Afton, Okla.

“That field trip really helped us see what’s available for those kids in northeast Oklahoma,” recalled Greg Gorman, superintendent of Northeast-Arma USD 246 in Crawford County, “and what we need to do to make the same types of opportunities for our kids in southeast Kansas.”

## **Oklahoma’s approach**

On a Tuesday morning at Northeast Technology Center, about an hour south of Pittsburg, a dozen students worked at computers in J.R. Morris’ information technology class.

Garrett Jean Price, a senior from rural Quapaw High School, was using the graphics software Autodesk Maya to develop a three-dimensional desert landscape, and trying to add in naturalistic daytime and nighttime lighting.

Asked how this class compares to the coursework at his high school, he said he prefers it.

“I enjoy it,” the 17-year-old said. “It’s a lot more hands on.”

Price doesn’t pay tuition to attend NTC, a benefit of being a local high-schooler that will extend one year past his graduation.

He is considering using his extra year — called a 13th year scholarship and available to all local high-schoolers — to study accounting.

NTC has four campuses across eight counties and serves 39 school districts. Most of the districts are rural or town schools classified by the U.S. Department of Education as distant or remote because of their isolation from larger towns.

This is one of 29 tech centers in Oklahoma, with 59 campuses, which form a network of career and technical education that covers most of the state and is free for high-schoolers. It is a system that dates back to the 1960s.

“Access to a technology center is available to most people,” said Paula Bowles, head of communications for Oklahoma’s CareerTech department.

Data from the department indicate about a fifth of Oklahoma juniors and seniors with access to that network enrolled at the tech centers last year, including more than a quarter of the juniors and seniors at rural schools.

The campuses are primarily funded with property taxes — NTC levies 11 mills — and residents of each school district vote on whether to pay those taxes so their students can attend. The state contributed just under \$100 million last year, with extra funding going to parts of the state with weaker local property bases.

Oklahoma CareerTech officials argue the investment is worthwhile. They point to research they commissioned that estimated students who completed career and tech programs in 2011 would produce nearly \$2 billion in direct benefits above the cost of educating them. Most of that figure was estimated future income.

Alexander Holmes, a professor of economics at the University of Oklahoma and a former budget director for the state, said he isn’t aware of any independent studies focused on Oklahoma’s system, but research across the country has found technical education offers economic benefits.

“That’s one reason why President Obama made that a central part of his plan to, as he talks about it, develop the middle class,” Holmes said.

Paul Hocutt, a former high school principal who now directs the Afton campus, said Oklahoma's system gives high-schoolers more career-training options than schools can provide in-house.

"It's really difficult if you're at a high school trying to fund a stand-alone program," he said.

At Hocutt's campus, students can choose from among 14 career majors at the multiple-building site, ranging from electrical technology to diesel repair and business administration. This semester, about 300 high-schoolers enrolled.

### **Kansas initiative**

Kansas' career and technical education initiative was promoted by Gov. Sam Brownback and passed the Legislature in 2012. In its first year, the number of high-schoolers enrolled at the state's 26 technical and community colleges rose more than 50 percent.

District-by-district tallies from the Kansas Board of Regents indicate enrollment among rural high-schoolers in post-secondary career courses grew from 2,240 in 2013 to 3,160 last year, a 40 percent jump. Town enrollments rose 30 percent.

The expansion of career and technical education also is boosting the number of Kansans with post-secondary credentials, said Blake Flanders, vice president of workforce development at the Board of Regents.

"We're doing so much better than we were before," he said.

In 2010, the Regents set a goal of raising post-secondary attainment from 52 percent to 60 percent of the state's working-age population by 2020. This target was based on a Georgetown University study that projected a little less than two-thirds of Kansans would need post-secondary credentials by then in order to keep up with workforce demand.

Board of Regents data indicate that, without the increase last year in high-schoolers receiving post-secondary credentials, Kansas wouldn't have met its annual target toward this 2020 goal. The state's decision to cover tuition for high-schoolers appears to be encouraging community and technical colleges across the state, not just in Crawford County, to increase access to these courses.

"I think that we have more partnership between post-secondary institutions, our technical colleges and school districts than ever before," Flanders said.

### **Jobs in demand**

Gary Mattson, manager of human resources for AZZ Enclosure Systems in Pittsburg — which builds metal enclosures for power distribution control systems — estimates he needs about 20 to 30 electricians to grow his company's business in southeast Kansas.

The problem? He says he lacks qualified applicants.

"I think there's been a group of people for years, many years, looking to do what we're trying to achieve," Mattson said of Pittsburg's tech center and its potential to address shortages like this.

Mattson, also a member of the facility's board, is optimistic about the effects for Crawford and neighboring counties if Pittsburg can attract more manufacturing companies.

"We roll out \$6.5 million in local payroll" annually, he said of AZZ's operations in Crawford. "You add a couple of those, it changes a community."

Brownback's program includes incentives for schools to steer students in the direction of high-demand jobs, such as electrical work and welding. In addition to covering tuition, it offers high schools \$1,000 for each student who completes certification in a high-demand field and graduates from high school.

The Pittsburg tech center currently offers welding, carpentry and masonry, with plans to add electrical training, automotive, heating and ventilation technology, culinary arts and training

for health and emergency medical professions during the next few years.

The median nonurban welder in Kansas earns \$32,230, which is \$5,000 under Crawford's median total household income. The median nonurban brick mason earns \$46,000 in Kansas, and the median nonurban electrician earns \$37,970.

"If I would have had this in high school, I know I would have been there," said Nacoma Oehme, a longtime mason who tells his students at Pittsburg's tech center that bricklaying can be a career in itself or a way to pay for college. "As long as you have your hands, you can always make a living."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, demand for masons is expected to grow more than 30 percent between 2012 and 2022. Growth in demand for electricians is projected at 20 percent, and for welders, 6 percent.

## **Capital investment**

Creating this facility would have been difficult without outside help.

Four of the participating school districts are in the bottom 10 percent in the state in terms of local property valuation, making it more difficult to raise money for investments like this.

The support of companies, city and county governments and the Bicknell Family Foundation was crucial.

In 2008, Vinylplex president Bill Coleman, a Pittsburg businessman who has since died, rented his unused PVC facility to the schools for \$1 a year.

Later, the Bicknell charity donated \$1 million, allowing the tech center's board to purchase the building and renovate it.

The city of Pittsburg contributed \$300,000, and Crawford County decided to allocate \$375,000 over three years to help pay for the renovations.

Fort Scott Community College, based 30 miles north of Pittsburg, provides instructors and plans on leasing the space. The tech center's board is negotiating a rate to cover utilities and maintenance.

The project's success may hinge in part, however, on the state's long-term commitment to funding the high school tech initiative. The state's annual allocations pay for instructors.

Throughout the years, Kansas governors and lawmakers have eliminated or reduced funding for a variety of education programs they or their predecessors once supported.

## **Lifelong skills**

Pittsburg High student Mack O'Dell piled mortar onto the square base of a bench, three bricks tall. He eased a fourth layer of bricks into it, laid a level on top and tapped the implement repeatedly with the handle of his trowel.

This is the hardest part, O'Dell explained.

"It's not just getting it level," the high school sophomore said, "but keeping an even mortar going all the way around. It takes time to practice."

Nearby, several masonry students worked on their own projects, miniature brick walls.

For O'Dell, the draw of this program is at least partly the daily sense of satisfaction.

"I enjoy it a lot," he said. "How to build something with your hands and look at it at the end of the day and say, 'Yeah, I made that.'"

Soon, this bench would be auctioned on the radio. Proceeds from selling it and other items go toward such costs as buying more materials for the masonry class and helping students travel to competitions.

On the other side of the tech center, a dozen juniors and seniors learning carpentry were installing a wrap-around staircase on the wooden frame that serves as a practice module for house construction.

Some of the students said they are angling for jobs in these fields. Others, unsure what path they will take, said the skills they learn at this center will help them with their own homes someday, if not employment.

“I would really be interested in something like this,” O’Dell said of masonry. “There’s always going to be people that want to build a house. There’s always going to be jobs out there.”

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