

The right stuff

Seaway Valley rewarded for their efforts **BY MICHAEL COLLINS-WILLIAMS**

The Seaway Valley Construction and Trades Association may be a small local, but they are doing some big things to promote the industry to students in their community. And their efforts are catching the attention of both area young people and the community at large. Last year the association won the Eastern Ontario Skills Development Award from their local training board, which recognized the leadership the association has shown in ensuring the right skills are offered at the high school level to help ensure there will be future tradespeople for the local industry needs.

Luc Marion, President of Grant Marion Construction, notes that "there were many cut-backs to shop programs dating back 20 to 25 years, and years ago co-op students weren't all that good; they weren't really interested in the trades and just wanted a credit for what they looked at as a bird course." The Eastern Ontario Training Board first approached a somewhat skeptical association eight years ago to work with the industry to determine what kind of proper training was required for students to be equipped to make a quick transition to the workforce. The association stated their grievances regarding the old structure of the co-op programs and a meeting was held with school board representatives to review the program and provide industry feedback.

Seaway association President Normand Robitaille says: "We've been working on this for many years and one school adjusted their curriculum according to industry suggestion." Marion adds that the school "revised their program based on our feedback and integrated subjects such as the imperial system into other courses." The key issue for the association according to Marion was that the successful schools share their program knowledge with other local schools through the Eastern Ontario Training Board. Overall, the

close ties between the industry, students and the school board have proved to be a very worthwhile endeavour for the association in its promotion of construction as a viable career choice.

Every year the Orientation Program in Trades for Youth in Greater Cornwall (OPTYC) works with local employers and trades groups to increase the awareness in secondary school students about local employment opportunities. In the first phase, students from area secondary schools are invited to participate in a Trades Presentation Day at the Cornwall Campus of St. Lawrence College. A number of builders and trades from the Seaway association participate on an annual basis to teach students about potential construction-related career paths. The second phase of the program allows students to apply to job-shadow trades through the revised co-op programs offered at local high schools following a day of job safety training.

The program has been tremendously successful since it was launched in 2001 with an average of over 1,000 students attending the presentation days and approximately 85 students being involved in the on-site job-shadowing. Many of the students have gone from the co-op program into apprenticeship programs and have worked for members of the local association. Robitaille notes that the students are well-prepared in terms of their knowledge from the courses, and "the safety courses are very helpful in preparing students for a quick transition to the workforce." Marion explains: "We tell our members as much as possible to expose students to a variety of skills and that co-op students aren't just an extra pair of hands on-site." The Seaway Valley Construction and Trades Association continues to be involved with the Eastern Ontario Training Board to work with students and local secondary schools to promote careers in construction.

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