

AHS co-op: Giving students hands-on workplace experience

Jessica Smith

Atikokan employers continue to support the AHS co-operative education program.

Most of the ten students this year are in their second year with the program and are looking to further their on-the-job work experience.

The experience and skills they are acquiring may help them solidify their career aspirations or lead to summer or longer term employment, said AHS guidance counsellor Ed Ojala.

For the employer, the benefit can be some extra help and possibly a future employee who already has some familiarity with the workplace and job.

Students are on the job most weekday afternoons to earn their required 220 hours for two high school credits.

Co-op is open to grade eleven and twelve students. Many "are starting to look more closely at what they would like to do and now they have more of an idea of what they want to do, career-wise," said Ojala. "All the employers were more than willing to have the students back or else had had good reviews from their previous employers and were willing to take them on. The students have built their own good reputation."

Paragon Auto Body, a long time co-op supporter, is hosting two returning students this year, Jimmy White and Adam Foy.

The placement has not only lets White do something he loves (and work on his own truck in his spare time), but his natural ability and experience is an asset to the auto body shop as well, said Paragon owner Mel Barnard.

"He's almost like a natural at it, and that is very rare," says Barnard of White, who was just finishing the replacement of a hood and fender on one vehicle when we dropped by. "You can usually tell pretty quickly whether or not they have it."

Michael Ducharme (also in Grade 12) has returned to M&C Motors this year, and "he is a really good student; he already knows a lot," said owner Jared Wood. M&C Motors is also a long-time supporter of the co-op program, and typically has students like Ducharme who are interested in mechanics work hands on, assisting in vehicle repairs.

"I learn something new every day," said Ducharme, adding that "it comes natural to me; I've been twisting wrenches since I was little."

Wood said it depends on the student's skill level as to what responsibilities they can handle, but they try to offer them a variety of duties "to keep them interested."

Ojala said AHS auto shop has helped some students gain mechanical skills to be an asset at places like Paragon, M&C, and Tramin's welding shop.

Other AHS students are placed at North Star School (as

assistant to an EA), Rentech, AGH Extended Care, Community Living Atikokan, and the Rainbow Centre Daycare.

The co-op program's classroom component includes instruction in creating resumes, health and safety, legal and harassment issues, preparation for job interviews, basic job skills, and practices that help in successfully attracting and retaining employment.

At the beginning of the semester, Ojala helps students figure out their preferred workplace or type of work, and will contact employers to make the request. For instance, the placement at Rentech's wood pellet plant was the result of "a specific job interest" expressed by the student this school year.

"Access to learning on new technologies" and learning from "experts in the field and those practical applications" are important aspects of the program, as are general employability skills, said Ojala.

"To learn about being on time, showing initiative, staying off of their phones - it's all so important."

The small number and limited diversity of workplaces in a small town make it a bit more challenging to find placements in the trades, Ojala said. Particularly challenging to access are placements related to electrical work (although past placements have been at OPG, Atikokan Hydro, and RLTC) and heavy duty mechanics (the Town has hosted some placements and M&C has tried to help if they have repairs to heavy duty equipment) when students have an interest in that field.

However, when the AHS can match a student up with a workplace that fits his/her career interest and is willing to work with the student, they have the potential to continue the student-employer partnership with an apprenticeship through Ontario's Youth Apprenticeship Program. Two years ago co-op student Kory Coulson completed a truck and coach technician apprenticeship with Rainy Lake Tribal Contracting, while completing grade twelve. This was made possible through a partnership between the employer, AHS, and the Employment Centre.

The co-op program also includes a summer component for specialist high skills major students in either the environmental sciences or tourism and hospitality fields. In that case, the student can earn extra credits toward their post secondary education "and it looks good on a resume too," said Ojala.

Following the on-the-job work placement experience, students are required to follow-up with a letter thanking the employer for hosting their placement, and submit an assignment which reflects on their job experience.

For some students who are conscientious about their placement, the rewards could even be a summer or longer term job, as some employers have hired past co-op students.

The on-the-job experience helps a student make a more informed decision about their postsecondary education.

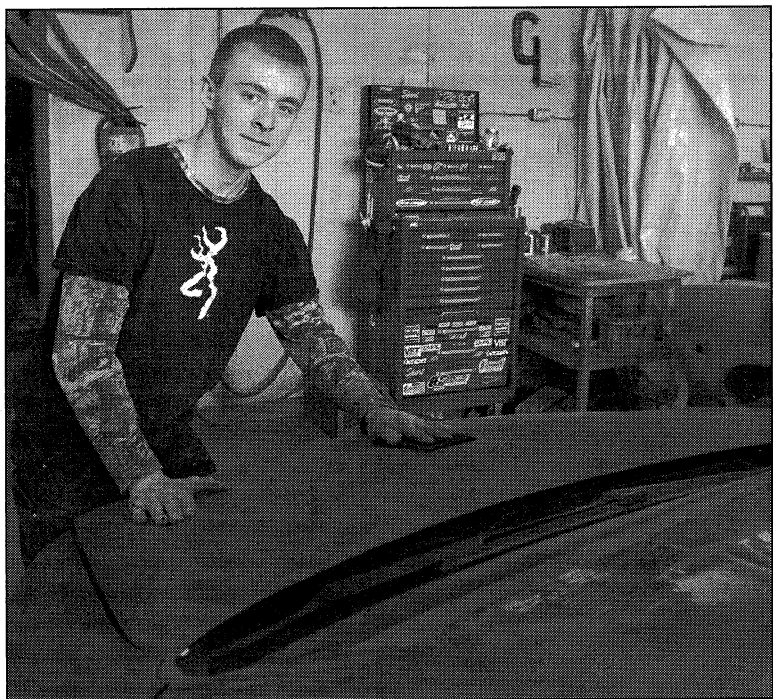
Grade twelve student Tami-Lyn Poirier has enjoyed assisting her supervisor Amanda Desgroseilliers with a variety of typical daycare duties (supervision during quiet time, outside play, snack preparation, etc.) at the Rainbow Centre, and said it has helped realize that childcare is not the right fit for her.

The Centre has hosted numerous co-op students over the years and the experience has been a definite indicator one way or other for numerous students considering a career in childcare, said Desgroseilliers.

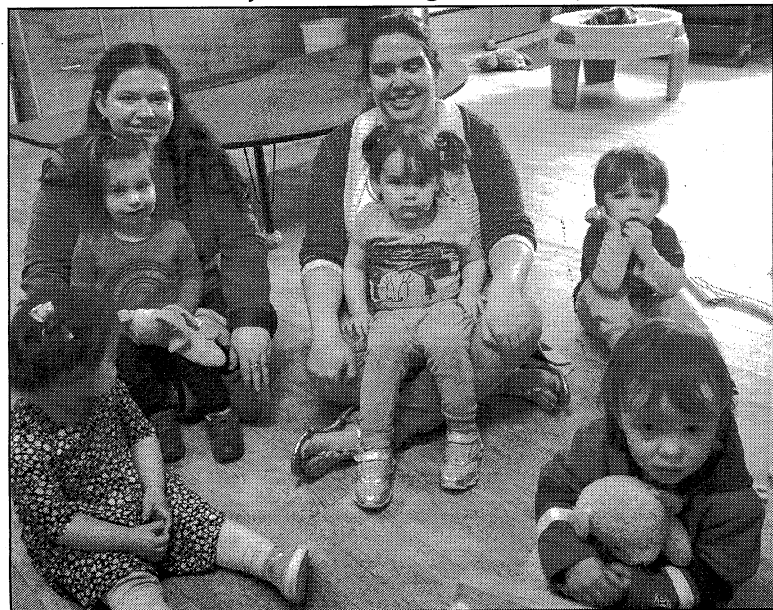
Supervising play, clean-up, and helping with math for 40 youngsters has also been an effective way to "test the waters" for grade twelve student Brianna LeSage.

"I knew [the experience] would either make me want to work with children or push me in the opposite direction," she said. Based on her experience assisting educators Anna Demchuk and Melissa Miller with North Star School's early learning (JK and SK) classes, LeSage has now decided to earn her early childhood educator qualifications.

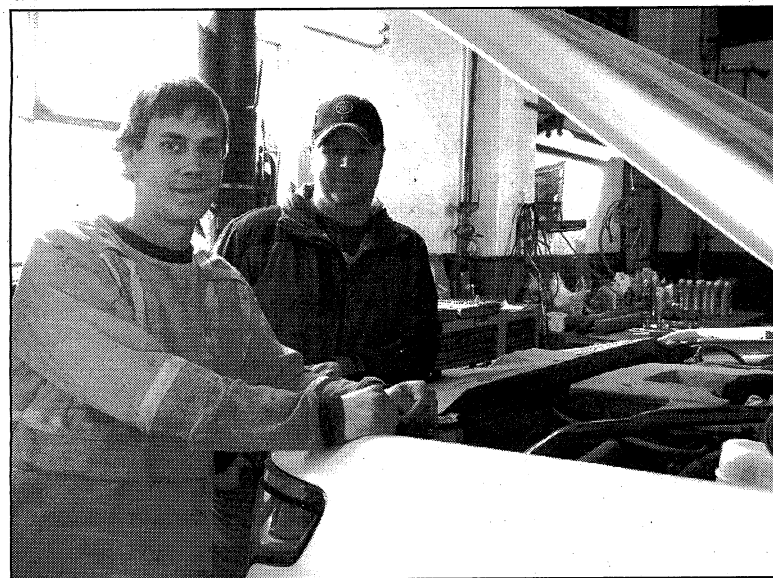
"I love it, it's so fun. The kids are always saying, 'Miss LeSage, I love you,'" she said with a laugh. "It's something new every day with them."



Jimmy White at Paragon Auto Body



Tami-Lyn Poirier (left) with supervisor Amanda Desgroseilliers and the kids at Rainbow Daycare



Michael Ducharme at M & C Motors, with shop owner Jared Wood



Josh Snell doesn't have to go far from class to co-op; he works with the school board maintenance crew. We caught him with Bonnie Stewart.



Brianna LeSage at North Star School. her co-op experience has convinced her to become an early childhood educator