

# Valley Tech stands out

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The school called Valley Tech is making a name for itself among the state's vocational-technical schools.

Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School is the first voke school to have 100 percent of its students pass the MCAS graduation requirement, [according to a recent report by the Pioneer Institute, a non-partisan public policy think tank.](#)

In 2007, Valley Tech's dropout rate was .2 percent compared to 3.8 percent statewide. Regional vocational schools serve more than 27,000 students in Massachusetts and they are in high demand. Many have long waiting lists. Blackstone has 400 more applicants than open spots for the class of 2012 - the longest waiting list out of a group of 12 vocational-technical schools.

At a forum last week on vocational-technical schools, Treasurer Tim Cahill credited Valley Tech for, "stepping up to show the way for others."

But School Superintendent Michael Fitzpatrick isn't taking the school's success for granted.

"We cannot rest on our laurels," he said. "We must always be nurturing and provoking change, motivating our teachers and challenging our students."

Students who attend the school consider themselves lucky.

"I came here because I am a very hands-on learner," said Lindsay Melanson, a senior from Milford and member of the business technology program. "I like the fact that I am learning about business by doing it."

Melanson, who is applying to the University of New Haven in Connecticut for hotel management, is already working for Commercial Technologies in Millbury through the school's co-op program.

Because two weeks out of each month are dedicated to academic core classes and the other two on hands-on shop or co-op work, the students at Blackstone have to learn the same amount of material as their peers in public schools in half the time.

The school also completes up to 800 community projects in the 13 towns it serves each year.

"They learn on the job, it's a cooperative effort," said Mary Lou Anderson, program coordinator for the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation.

As an employee of the education foundation, Anderson has enjoyed a front row seat to the community work of Blackstone Valley students.

"We hold a career fair every year and we were looking for some way to erect signs. We came up with a sketch, the students made a prototype and built 16 of them for us," she said. "They were very responsive to our needs."

Anderson said that when Millville's veterans' plaque wall was damaged, students came up with a way to make eight plaques and engraved 300-400 names of World War I and World War II veterans on each of them.

Part of what makes Blackstone Valley students so attentive is the work of the teachers at the school.

"Our staff is unbelievable, we are so varied in background and education," said Rebecca Swasey, an English instructor. "We get along extremely well. It's like a family."

Swasey said that preconceived notion of vocational-technical schools as "dumping grounds" couldn't be further from the truth.

The students "behave like professionals and they act like young adults," she said. "I am always continually impressed with what the kids are doing at such a young age."

Chad McCarthy, a senior from Millbury, and member of the carpentry program renovated his parents' house by himself - with some oversight from his uncle, a carpenter.

"We moved into a new house and I just went for it and gutted the rooms," he said. McCarthy, who is applying to the Coast Guard after he graduates, hopes to own a home construction business one day.

"I'm going to miss it so much," he said of graduating. "Everything is so supported here. Things really get done around here."

After graduating, many of the students are placed in jobs in one of the 13 communities served by the school. Some return to Blackstone Valley as teachers.

"This feeds right into our economic development plan," said Jeannie Hebert, president of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"We'd be totally lost without vocational technical schools," said Cahill. "They provide students with the skill set to fix something and the brain power to run a business."