

Going Shopping for School Clothes with My 12 Year Old Granddaughter

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High-waisted, baggy, flared jeans, neutral colors. Comfort. Birkenstock sandals were essential. And they have to be worn with Nike socks.

My wife and I got to spend two days shopping with our granddaughter, and it was a wonderful chance to get a glimpse into her tweener brain. Seventh grade is an important time to start developing interests and habits that will lead to a successful career. I think she still has Veterinarian as a top choice, but I think the next few years will broaden her options. Gen Z has watched the Millennials struggle in the workforce with college degrees in the social sciences and college debt. They are more realistic about careers.



A little workforce history: back in the 1980s, our K-12 schools largely eliminated what were called “shop classes,” i.e. training for the trades, to emphasize four-year college education instead. Those jobs in the trades belonged to the Baby Boomers and there were plenty of Boomers to meet the need back then. By the turn of the century, the Boomers started retiring and there was little training capacity to replace them in the trades. Factoid: in 2005, Lakeshore Technical College serving Manitowoc and Sheboygan Counties, one of the most intensive manufacturing regions of the country, did not have a welding program! At Bay Area Workforce Development Board, we helped them start one.

Now the last of the Boomer generation will be retiring over the next decade. Since it takes 18 years to grow a worker, preparing the workforce we will need during the next decade has to be a priority in our region.

Over the last 20 years, much has been accomplished in The NEW North to reestablish and encourage training in the trades. NEW Manufacturing Alliance is an example of a

true success story in creating positive change by building partnerships with K-12 schools.

Youth Apprenticeship is an “earn while you learn” program for high school juniors and seniors consisting of work and related classroom instruction in chosen occupations. It implements a dual training system combining skills obtained on the job site with technical knowledge in the classroom. YA has grown by leaps and bounds in Wisconsin during the last decade. In the 2022-23 school year, 8,357 young people and 5,719 employer sponsors participated across the state. Students now have 20 career areas to choose from. In addition to traditional areas such as manufacturing, hospitality/tourism, and construction, there are opportunities in health science, project management, law enforcement, and finance to name a few. Employers are recognizing the value of joining this effort.

My only criticism of YA is that it attracts the best and brightest to take advantage of the opportunity. What about those students who are struggling in our schools? They will be essential to our workforce as well.

One bright spot is NEW School of Innovation, a charter school of the Green Bay Area Public School District that offers an alternative learning experience to students, grades 7-12, who find it hard to succeed in a traditional classroom setting. The school currently serves 250 students and it is housed on the NWTC campus in a partnership that ensures strong vocational education by incorporating career pathways in coursework and student experiences. Juniors and seniors can achieve dual credit through NWTC. The student body is 69% economically disadvantaged and 73% are of minority ethnicity. It is an excellent example of a school that adjusts its curriculum to help students succeed in the regional workforce. Principal Jason Johnson tells me that their graduation rates have fluctuated from a high of 93% to a low of 78%. That is a significant achievement.

Another area initiative that is designed to build our future workforce is the New Scholars program at College Ready. College Ready, formerly Scholarships, Inc., is a long-established foundation that assists students and their families in meeting the cost of postsecondary education. In 2015 the New Scholars program was initiated for students who would be the first in their families to enroll in postsecondary education to prepare for college through a series of afterschool and weekend programs along with their families. A sixth grade cohort began in 2015, and one grade was added each year until the initial cohort graduated from high school in 2021. The program continues with cohorts from grades 6 to 12 each year. Students and their families who continue through all seven years may receive up to a \$5,000 college scholarship.

More than 90% of the students who complete the program attend postsecondary education, a remarkable achievement for students from families that would otherwise be unfamiliar with postsecondary training opportunities. It is always an emotional event at the annual Lamp of Knowledge event to watch the 12th graders hand off their mortarboards to the new 6th graders who are dressed in graduation robes. Once again, we are building a future workforce that will contribute to our regional economy in the years to come.

My 7th grade granddaughter and her friends have six years of school ahead to enjoy their young years. With all the changes we are witnessing in postsecondary education, it will be interesting to see what postsecondary education looks like in 2031. It is obvious that those educational institutions are facing unprecedented challenges already. The one thing we know is that we will need these young people in our workforce and we will need them to have the skills to succeed in a new world of work.