

Slogan here

# OYAP helps students make informed decisions

By Krista Avey

Brenton Joseph recognizes a good thing when one comes his way.

The 18-year-old St. Thomas Moore student just started his third work placement through the Catholic District School Board's co-operative education program and officially begins the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) this February.

"It makes sense," said Joseph about coming back to high school for a fifth year to complete OYAP. "I can earn while I learn." His current work placement is at Airport Ford, where he's getting hands-on training in the field of automotive service technician for three days each week, while spending the other two days studying theory in the classrooms of Mohawk College.

OYAP offers students the opportunity to develop the skills that will help them to prepare for an apprenticeship. Students take technology courses, usually at their high school, and combine that with a co-operative education work placement to gain hands-on experience. A modified version of the OYAP program gives students an opportunity to earn advanced standing in an apprenticeship by completing the first apprenticeship course while they are still attending high school.

It's not always immediately clear to students which career path they may be interested in, so Joseph recommends trying out different technology courses to see what appeals most.

"I would tell students if they're not sure what to do, to work hard in school and try your best," he said. "Take some courses and see what you're interested in."

Coming into high school, Joseph says he had some interest in automotive class, so took the course and has done two previous

co-op placements at Johnson Chrysler Jeep. He also tried a construction course, but that just wasn't where his interests were.

"I am interested in the automotive field and like working with my hands and with tools," Joseph said. "I think there is going to be a large demand for automotive technicians in the years to come."

Leo Paone, OYAP co-ordinator for the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, said over the next five to 10 years it is expected that one-third of Ontario's skilled workforce will be eligible to retire and continuing growth of Ontario's economy demands that qualified, educated, skilled workers be trained to meet the new demands.

"Here we have a program where students who participate will complete high school with 1,000 to 2,000 hours of training in an apprenticeship; they could have their basic level training from Mohawk College and are signed as apprentices," said Paone. "Our program is about trying to get students, who are interested in working in skilled trades, doing just that."

Hamilton is an acknowledged provincial leader in Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program apprenticeship signings. The growth of the program has been overwhelming, said Paone.

In 2000-2001, he said the Catholic board had only 154 students participating in an apprenticeable trade in co-operative education and 18 who were registered as apprentices. Last year, 571 students participated and 104 were signed on to apprenticeship contracts.

OYAP is funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities with the intention of providing more options for students interested in pursuing a career in the skilled trades. The MTCU is responsible for registering apprentices throughout the

province, as well as for the purchase of seats for the in-school sessions. Students who are signed as registered apprentices continue to be tracked by the training consultant, who is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the apprenticeship program.

As well as getting valuable hands-on experience in an apprenticeable trade, students are "making valuable work connections and gaining knowledge and skills that will help them better their chances for success when they graduate with an Ontario Secondary School diploma," according to Reece Morgan, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's OYAP co-ordinator. "The OYAP program is a win-win situation," Morgan added. "These students are helping themselves to make informed career decisions while allowing prospective employers to get a better look at prospective employees."

Last year, the public board had just over 600 students participate in OYAP, with 111 students signed as registered apprentices.

"Employers are beginning to see the advantage to having a willing, able-bodied young person as a future potential employee," Morgan said.

Richard Raos is an 18-year-old graduate of Saltfleet High School. He's currently doing an OYAP placement at Dewildt Honda.

"I'm getting a lot of hands-on experience working here," Raos said. "When I was in Grade 8, I knew I wanted to be a motorcycle mechanic, but I thought I wouldn't make much money. I guess I just didn't know much about it."

Now Raos not only gets to work on bikes with skills he's learning through OYAP, he's working full-time for pay, while still getting an education.

"This gives you a chance to save money, but you're still forced to go to school," he says.

Raos said he's learned the important mechanical skills he needs for his profession, but also a great deal about working with others, communication skills and working under pressure to get a job done.

It will probably be two-and-a-half years before Raos becomes a licensed automotive service technician, but it's a commitment he's ready to make.

"I encourage people to take co-op in high school because it definitely is a good program. And do whatever it is you love."

The OYAP training in Hamilton also receives support from the Skilled Trades Alliance (STA), a community-led, community-driven initiative which works to strengthen and sustain the skilled trades workforce in the community.

The STA makes calls to potential employers to gauge their interest in taking on apprentices.

"Certainly, they help us connect our students to placements," said Paone. "Last year, they gave us four or five good company contacts to hook up with."

As OYAP numbers continue to increase, so too will the skilled trades workforce in Hamilton — ensuring the pending shortages will be met with a viable solution.