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Article published Oct 19, 2013

## Middle school students learn about manufacturing as career

By [Lee Howard](#) Day Staff Writer

**Norwich** - Nearly 100 students from middle schools around the region converged Friday on Three Rivers Community College for a chance to explore a manufacturing career.

Kids made bracelets, constructed metal structures and assembled a complex carnival ride as they attended "Manufacturing Mania," an event sponsored by the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology, the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance and other organizations trying to boost economic development in the region.

Among the students attending the event were Jacob Chan, Alan Feng and Neil Henostroza, students at Teachers Memorial Middle School in Norwich, who helped assemble an award-winning carnival ride in a seemingly impossible 12 minutes.

"It's better than sitting in a boring class," Chan smiled.

Bruce Karasik, program budget administrator for the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology, said he was impressed with the teamwork and effort of the students, who worked in true-to-life manufacturing "cells" involving logistics, assembly and customer service to manage their projects.

"This gives them some insight," Karasik said. "It's fun, and it makes it interesting."

Students, including those from Lisbon Middle School, also got to view the way 3-D printing works, witnessing how basic plans are converted into a jack-o'-lantern.

A group from Collins & Jewell in Norwich offered kids a chance to work in threes to make a scaled-down metal structure, while Mary Fitzgerald, president of Acme Wire in Mystic, let students create what she jokingly referred to as "Acme and Ani" wire bracelets similar to the popular Alex and Ani jewelry.

"It's not too early to think about your careers," state Department of Labor Commissioner Sharon Palmer told students at an assembly before the manufacturing demonstrations began.

"Try new things," she added. "Find out what it is you enjoy doing."

Palmer pointed out that manufacturing is a better career than some might think. While the average annual wage in Connecticut is \$58,000, she said, the average manufacturing wage is \$73,000, and for advanced manufacturing it's even more - \$86,000.

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said Connecticut is a world leader in manufacturing certain key products, such as nuclear submarines built by Electric Boat.

"We succeed with what's between our ears," he said. "It's about innovation."

Marge Valentin, associate dean of Three Rivers, pointed out to students that Connecticut makes a wide range of products, including jet engines, chocolate, medicine and motorcycles. In fact, many Connecticut cities were once known primarily by what they manufactured: Bristol for clocks, Waterbury for brass, Meriden for silver and Willimantic for threads.

But this could be one of the problems in attracting young people to manufacturing, officials acknowledge. Many parents connect these old, dying industries to the world of manufacturing

today, when in fact the whole segment has changed radically - and is evolving still.

"Recruitment is a real challenge," acknowledged Lisa Sanders, secretary of the manufacturing alliance and human resources manager for Alpha Q, an aerospace manufacturer in Colchester. "There's a lack of knowledge and understanding about what is out there for children."

John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, said manufacturing stereotypes must be met head-on because young people are needed to fill the shoes of retiring baby boomers in a wide variety of fields.

"It's an important part of eastern Connecticut's economy," he said.

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