

| Money Concerns and Obstacles: How BOCES Perseveres Through Tough Times

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This is a story about perseverance, success, frustration and the ability to move forward despite setbacks. Where do aspiring teenage trade workers from New York such as chefs, hairdressers and mechanics get their start? BOCES is the answer!

It's a cold fall day and the wind is whistling loudly. In Westbury, Long Island is a sign in small gray letters reading Joseph M. Barry Career and Technical Education Center. The sign stretches around a metallic maroon awning and ends abruptly. The complete opposite of what a school is supposed to look like. There is nobody around as I enter the building through the double doors and into a big atrium with long hallways and high ceilings. This is the BOCES trade program, informally known as Barry Tech.

A steep gray stairway leads down into the automotive collision program shop. One of the most hectic environments to experience if you haven't been into a mechanic's garage. The garage has high ceilings and a warehouse feel, even though the shop is relatively small. There are a couple of stripped-down cars where the make and model were removed from the car itself. The car's doors and shells are held up by red car-lifts. Students buff out spots on painted car panels; some panels are neon yellow while others are just plain gray. Paint cans line the dusty floor and the loud swishing sounds of air hoses fill the auto shop. No music plays in the background; just loud talkative students' voices fill the garage. The mood is frenzied but at the same time it's controlled and intimate.

These students are engaged in their craft; some students do not even move throughout the course of the day and finish their job. They work until that final bell rings

to signal the end of the morning session. Empty car shells sit abandoned while other projects involving cars are hurriedly going on in the background--such as painting car shells, refinishing, polishing and painting car panels. There are about 20 students in this program, all male except for one female student.

The BOCES program was founded in 1948 by 40 or so educational officials.

There are properties in both New York and Colorado.

Thirty seven of those educational properties are in New York. The current overall budget for BOCES sits at \$3,405,292,489. Each individual BOCES center is funded jointly by the main governing body of BOCES and the school district that readily requires their services. To clarify this point in the words of the New York State Education Department, "It is supported by payments from local school districts for requested services and through state and federal funding formulas. Local districts receive state aid for BOCES services they use."

A prevalent theme in the BOCES programs running through dedicated work by students and passion of the instructors. This theme is displayed through a variety of means whether it be students and faculty advocating for the continuation of the BOCES program or through programs helping incarcerated teens turn their lives around and become productive members of society. BOCES has always been there to help students succeed no matter what the case is. Which is essentially why the story about to be told is both important and timely.

In an interview with NYSUT (New York State United Teachers), Sandie Carner-Shafran from the Saratoga-Adirondack BOCES Education Association, said, “For many kids, it’s [the impending budget cuts] killing their dreams. If we can’t provide this education for kids, where are they going to get it from?” said Carner-Shafran That’s all because if the two sides (which are those for budget cuts vs those against budget cuts) can’t come to an agreement, students will no longer be able to get an education from BOCES or other equivalent schools. What’s at stake is educational programs being cut and this opportunity of attending a local trade school is in jeopardy.

The New York state-wide BOCES program is an educational program that cooperates with other school districts to provide education and skills training services to students in a variety of non-educational concentrations, through various educational programs as well as transportation to these programs. Meaning the school provides transportation to students who request it. As well as providing transportation to students that are coming from their home schools to BOCES centers. According to the New York State Board Association BOCES was created by the New York State legislature to supply and provide “shared educational programs and services to school districts within the states.” The statement remains the main mission of all 37 New York State BOCES properties and beyond. Numerous school districts across the state are always looking to join up with BOCES in a cooperative partnership.

Previously this year, there were a couple of issues that have happened outside the classroom, kitchens and workshops. These issues threatened both BOCES programs and non-cooperative schools. First, Governor Andrew Cuomo was going to put a 2 % tax cap

on the education budget. The 2 % tax cap is to quote NYSUT; “The tax cap places an undemocratic supermajority requirement on votes for school budgets seeking to increase the school funding tax levy by more than two percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is less.”

This tax cap would hurt smaller and poorer school districts and potentially deny all students their education and related educational resources. If this legislation were approved it would ultimately force the tax cap to be permanent. The other issue was Cuomo’s proposed education budget. This budget details small increases to certain aid plans such as foundation and building aids.

The foundation aid created in 2006 was a plan created to closely analyze the unfairness and inequity in school funding. While the building aid is a reimbursement plan where the institution can receive money back from construction costs as well as other substantial building projects. Unfortunately other school districts across the state are having funding concerns, with the state’s Regents boards wanting a \$2 billion dollar education funding boost to help them out.

If BOCES were to lose their funding and cease to exist, it would be terrible for the state of New York as well as communities that house these BOCES centers. Dr. William Poll, the assistant vice principal of Barry Tech BOCES in Westbury, New York stated [the disappearance of the BOCES programs would be] “A huge loss for districts and would leave a serious impact across the country.” If budget cuts and not the end of the program were to occur Poll also stated that the board would simply: “Reduce staff and programs if it happened.”

To help fund these BOCES programs, a budget is put into place by the BOCES Board of Education department. The budget process is voted on every single school year by the board members which include school superintendents, education business officials, school principals, educators and administrators. Also whether school districts wanting to be affiliated with BOCES want to participate in BOCES programs are voluntary. These school districts pay to play, meaning they pay for their involvement and participation in BOCES education.

The way the budget process works is complicated. Brian Howard, the Director of Communications for Southern Westchester BOCES says that here; “[the budget process is] Basically different from any other school district. We have our own voting public. Directors of BOCES centers present to the board of education. We’re way out ahead of other school districts.” They need 32 districts to vote on the budget that BOCES of New York State has put together. The budget last year for Southern Westchester BOCES has always hovered around roughly \$175 million.

With it starting out in 1920 as \$175 and going down only 4 points to \$171 last year (2018). Howard expects the budget to “be in the same ballpark in 2021” Programs and services throughout the years in various BOCES properties have been either altered or removed entirely. Howard adds “Programs are added and programs are removed. Services are frequently added. Others are removed and other programs and services evolve.” t

At the helm of the automotive technology program at Barry Tech is Jon Gaare. Or, as the students affectionately call him, just “Gaare.” Gaare has been working as an

instructor of automotive technology at BOCES Barry Tech for over 18 years. He has had an interesting route of getting to his current career. Initially he obtained his B.F.A at Parsons School of Design in printmaking, a subject he excelled in, Gaare says, while he sits on a heightened red car lift supervising his students. Gaare excuses himself a few times to assist students with painting, doing so as he speaks to students who field him questions about their current tasks. Gaare is a hands-on instructor. “Initiative and work ethic are key here,” he says.

Matt Bader, a 17-year-old automotive technology student from Merrick, Long Island, is one of Gaare’s students. He says the class helped him gain more knowledge about body work. Bader was a good student, made the honor roll a few times, but this program is where he really excels. Bader joined the BOCES program just this year. “It’s a great program,” says, “there’s a lot of opportunity on stuff that you want to do.”

A typical day for a first year BOCES student is as follows: the students are bused from their high schools as early as 6 a.m. From 7:50 a.m. to 10:20 a.m. they are involved in a trade. Barry Tech has about 40 trade programs, including culinary arts, welding, HVAC, carpentry and automotive technology and is affiliated with numerous local high schools in Nassau County. Students attend Barry Tech part-time Monday through Friday; there are two sessions that take place during the day, the morning and afternoon sessions. Once students finish either of the day sessions they get bussed back to their home-schools. Students graduate from Barry Tech and obtain a certificate, which makes them qualified to work in the specific trades they have been trained for.

During the interview, Gaare helps one student fix a paint canister and gives job

advice to another. His method for success is to “[assist them] enough to get a basic job and teach them how to go to work to work.”

Gaare wishes there was more equipment and supplies for his students to use. “A lot of things don’t get purchased here. Too much paperwork, too much red tape for buying equipment.”

Gaare and his students along with other BOCES students across the state are reasons why jobs in the trades are so sought after now. In today's times, the economy needs more people working in jobs that require manual labor. According to an article titled “In 2019, Blue-Collar Workers Disappearing And In Hot Demand by Forbes,” “the demand for hard-hat and entry-level blue-collar jobs has grown steadily since the 2008 financial crisis.” The students in the automotive technology program are prime examples of the eagerness of people to go into the trades. And the New York State BOCES is just the kind of place to learn the skills to get one.

This is the case with 16-year-old automotive technology student Jeffery Rubio from Long Beach, Long Island. The program “builds your skills, step by step,” Rubio says. He is split on continuing with automotive collision or doing something entirely different. Rubio also hopes to go to college after graduating from Barry Tech using his automotive technology certificate and supporting himself with a job in the concentration.

Other students, like Bader, plan to enter the trade immediately after college. “I will go into the trade,” he says. “Construction, concrete and paving. My brother has a construction company, I’ll probably jump right in.”

Juan Pereomo, a 16-year-old automotive technology student from Roosevelt,



Long Island, is one of several students who says they work better in their trades than in course work in their regular high school. “I excel in here better than my high school,”

Pereomo says. “They put my knowledge to the test here.” Pereomo started going to Barry Tech in 2019 in his junior year, spending mornings in traditional classes at Roosevelt High School and afternoons at Barry Tech.

When the first half of the school day is over, an office door opens and sitting in a soft blue office chair is Dr. William Poll. He appears to be exhausted but quickly overcomes that and bursts back to life. The office is small but inviting as well as organized. Books and papers are neatly assorted while his desk is tidy.

Poll is the vice principal of BOCES Barry Tech and has been in that position for about eight years now. Poll talks about how the BOCES program operates and what each program’s goals are. “We pride ourselves [on being] a state-of-the-art institution,” he says. “[We] team up with the industry professionals and post-secondary institutions to ensure students what is needed in the field. So the students are career- and college-ready.”

Both Poll and Gaare, the automotive technology instructor, are unanimous about the impact that the BOCES program has on students. “It’s a good opportunity,” Gaare says.

Months later, I return to BOCES Barry Tech on a rainy February afternoon.

Entering the atrium, it feels as if I am there for the first time. It’s quiet and relaxed, not as hectic as what I would’ve imagined during the school day despite the afternoon session just starting. Minutes later, an administrator leads me to the far end of a long hallway. A teaching assistant intercepts me at the end of this long hallway and takes me into a

computer lab where students are hard at work.

Kevin Heinrich, who supervises the students, scurries back and forth to help students work on digital house design assignments. After doing so he asks a few students if they would like to be interviewed. Some of the students eagerly stand up and run over to talk about their experiences. Which is just what BOCES programs are: students eager and intent to do trades work.

Doug Zimmerman, a senior from Hicksville High School in Hicksville, Long Island, is passionate about HVAC and plumbing. He smiles and laughs as he speaks about the subject. “Not a lot of kids my age are given this opportunity to go into a field like this,” says Zimmerman. “I have a head start on everybody else.”

Zimmerman, along with a number of other students in the program, have voiced their quarrels with home high school and say they much rather prefer working at a trade school. “I like hands-on type of work better than sitting at a high school desk.” He continues, “Learning the trade has been valuable; I learned more for my future than I have in my home-school.”

After a few minutes, a group of students, along with the instructor Heinrich, get up and leave. One of the students who stays behind is Nick Russo, a senior from Oceanside High School in Oceanside, Long Island. Russo is a friendly student who enjoys HVAC as well as plumbing. Russo says he loves the program at Barry Tech and got into HVAC due to his curiosity and from his friend's father who owns a private plumbing business. “I came in here not knowing plumbing and ended up being certified in installing certain types of pipes,” Russo says.

After a long and winding walk to the other side of the school, we arrive at a large room strewn with pipes and building materials. Wooden house frames holding up bathrooms and boiler rooms are at the center of the room. The workshop is built to look like either bathrooms or boiler rooms; they have no walls, but skeleton frames. Students working in groups are diligently repairing these materials while softly talking to one another. Some of these projects include repairing plumbing and setting wire panels.

One student, Stephen Murphy, from Manhasset High School in Nassau County, supervises the other groups and grabs tools for them as needed. He assists several groups at once all while giving me a tour of the facilities. “I’m given the world on a silver platter,” he says. “I love it here!” His enthusiasm for the program is what many BOCES students have echoed time and time again.

Standing by is Heinrich who watches the students very closely. It’s in the workshop where the teacher comes alive. Heinrich is especially passionate while speaking about the program. “The program is important to me, but it’s also important to society as a whole,” he says. “There’s a real need for HVAC and plumbing guys. There’s a great opportunity for young people and also it’s very high paying.” Heinrich switches gears and talks about what could be improved. “More dedicated space would be helpful for this program.”

Now with the outbreak of COVID-19, in-person and hands-on instruction for BOCES Barry Tech as well as other BOCES schools are suspended until the end of the semester. So for the time being, classes are being taught through the online platform Zoom. Students perform tasks pertaining to their trade and participate in video instruction

as they normally would with this service. With social distance learning now in effect, this changes the way instructors teach as well as interact with their students. Instructors all across the United States and world must deal with this, making in-person instruction impossible.

Jon Gaare, the instructor for automotive technology at BOCES Barry Tech, says, “They’re not getting the experience. Sixty percent of the grade is not there and there’s nothing we can do about it.” Despite these setbacks in education, the instructors are still able to help students, although in different ways. Gaare has a different method when it comes to helping students during these times: “To try my best and just to have somebody to talk to. Talking about everything but what I’m teaching, asking what’s going on in their lives.”

In-person instruction is indeed important, not just for instructors, but for students as well. Kevin Heinrich, the HVAC instructor at BOCES Barry Tech, says, “We are a trade school, so teaching the skills needed to perform trade work remotely is challenging. Tools and material aren’t available to students in the remote learning model. Instruction is now more assignment-based and students need to show more initiative than ever.”

Attending BOCES has made a difference for me during my time in high school and beyond. While I didn’t graduate from BOCES Barry Tech and my time there only lasted a year, I learned to never give up and work hard despite any situation thrown my way. BOCES students are great examples of the definition of perseverance.

**SOURCE LIST/INTERVIEW SUBJECTS**

Name: Jon Gaare, auto collision instructor Barry Tech BOCES, 11/15/19, in-person  
interview Subject: Why the A.C. (auto collision) program is important to BOCES.  
Contact: jgaare@nasboces.org 516.622.6800 ext. 5323

Name: Dr. William Poll, vice principal Barry Tech BOCES, 11/15/19, in-person interview  
Subject: How BOCES program works at Barry Tech/ other important inquiries  
Contact: wpoll@nasboces.org (516) 622-6805

Name: Matt Bader, student of auto collision Barry Tech BOCES, 11/15/19, in-person  
interview Subject: Views on A.C. program Contact: N/A

Name: Juan Pereomo, student of auto collision Barry Tech BOCES, 11/15/19, in-person  
interview Subject: Views on A.C. program Contact: N/A

Name: Jeffery Rubio, student of auto collision Barry Tech BOCES, 11/15/19, in-person  
interview Subject: Views on A.C. program Contact: N/A

Name: Brian Howard, Director of Communications Southern Westchester BOCES,  
12/9/19, telephone interview. Subject: How a BOCES budget process works  
Contact: 914-922-3412

Name: Doug Zimmerman, student of HVAC Barry Tech BOCES, 2/13/20, in-person

interview Subject: Views on HVAC program Contact: N/A

Name: Nick Russo, student of HVAC Barry Tech BOCES, 2/13/20, in-person interview

Subject: Views on HVAC program Contact: N/A

Name: Stephen Murphy, student of HVAC Barry Tech BOCES, 2/13/20, in-person

interview Subject: Views on HVAC program Contact: N/A

Name: Kevin Heinrich, HVAC instructor Barry Tech BOCES, 2/13/20, in-person

interview Subject: Why the A.C. (auto collision) program is important to BOCES.

Contact: 631-294-5392 kheinrich@nasboces.org

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