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Sheet Metal Industry Training Centers Share Valuable Lessons About Post-COVID Education

The sheet metal industry is adept at adapting. So when COVID-19 resulted in the shut-down of classrooms across the country in early 2020, the industry banded together to minimize the impact on its training centers across the country, so that apprentices could continue on with their education.

What they achieved in such a short amount of time was so impressive that it even caught the attention of school districts who used the sheet metal industry's examples to ensure a smart and efficient reopening of their own schools.

In fact, many of the sheet metal industry Joint Apprentice and Training Centers (JATCs) will be implementing some of the adaptive measures post-COVID due to the immense benefits for students, instructors and the industry in general. Local JATCs are funded by contributions in local collective bargaining agreements and are jointly sponsored and operated by Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) local unions and Sheet Metal Air-conditioning Contractors National Association (SMACNA) chapters.

Leading the charge in Las Vegas, Nevada, is SMART Local 88 JATC's Training Director Ed Abraham.

When Nevada Governor Steve Sisolak issued a statewide stay-at-home order for Nevada's three million residents back in March 2020, Abraham was already ahead of the game. He had spent months researching technologies that would disinfect and clean the air to ensure apprentices and instructors could continue the face-to-face education so essential in the trade.

Armed with this knowledge, Abraham worked with the joint SMACNA of Southern Nevada and SMART Local 88 JATC board and was given the charge to implement the measures necessary for the training center to begin its reopening so classwork could continue, albeit on a smaller scale due to social distancing measures. "It cost us about \$20,000 upfront to get the training center operational again, but we were up and running again very quickly," Abraham says.

The measures were done so well, that Steve Vantine, a full-time instructor at Local 88's JATC says, "I feel safer here at our training center than anywhere to be honest!"

And the apprentices agree.

"It's amazing what Ed managed in such a short space of time. I feel safe and know the JATC has gone above and beyond to ensure we are as protected as we can be, which is important as I have a partner and eight kids who I also need to think about," says Antonio Saunders, a third year apprentice at the JATC in Las Vegas who works for Ryan Mechanical.

With all the safety measures in place, what has surprised the JATCs is the benefits of smaller class sizes for both the apprentices and the instructors.

“It's not like the teaching or the curriculum has changed, but the smaller class sizes as a result of the need to social distance makes it feel more personal,” Suanders says. “There's more one-on-one time. It's easier for me to ask my question without getting lost in the crowd.”

Vantine is also seeing the benefits. “The smaller groups allow me to do demonstrations far easier and capture the attention of the apprentices. It keeps them engaged.”

With this feedback, Abraham plans to begin scouting for more instructors so the training center can maintain the smaller class sizes post-pandemic. His team continues to learn from the lessons that came about as a result of the past year, and has passed his experiences on to others in the industry as well as local school boards who have reached out for advice.

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The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA) have a labor management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org.