

“It is a very powerful thing for me to see...”

The morning of March 27, 2006, Laura Lynn Welles met with 22 high school students in Mountain Village (pop. 786), 95 miles northwest of Bethel. That afternoon she met with 15 more students. The next day it was eight students and their teacher, and then eight students volunteered to meet with her one-on-one. The next day she flew 50 miles northwest to Emmonak (pop. 740), 10 miles from the Bering Sea, and spoke to 67 high school students. The day after that she met with 40 students and gave a Power Point presentation to 26. And that was just in the end of March.

Welles, like the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development’s six other “career guides,” is on a crusade – a crusade to tell as many students and their teachers, parents and siblings not only about the growing number of energy jobs in Alaska, but how to get them. They’re showing the students how to prepare themselves in high school now so they’ll be competitive enough to get an apprenticeship,

an internship or into training that will give them a craft, a job and a future.

The state’s seven career guides are jobs that were created as part of a \$7 million “High-Growth Job Training Initiative for Energy” grant the U.S. Department of Labor gave the Alaska Department of Labor last year. The money is for training Alaska adults and youth for jobs in oil, gas and mining, plus jobs in the industries that support oil, gas and mining – construction, and marine, pipeline and trucking transportation.

The purpose of the grant is to develop innovative ways the Alaska Department of Labor and other training providers can work hand-in-hand with industry and the state’s educational system to get people trained for Alaska’s economic opportunities, said Corine Geldhof, director of the Alaska Department of Labor’s Division of Business Partnerships.

Geldhof said the grant is part of President Bush’s push to get Americans trained for jobs in high-growth fields such as energy at a time when baby boomers are retiring and the demand for workers trained with industry-recognized skills is increasing.

She said the growth in Alaska’s energy industry,

Instructor David Lipp of Anchorage (right) shows Derrick Andrews of Aleknagik (far left) and Evan Ishnook of Kokhanok the controls of the tractor trailer they learned to drive during Alaska Works Partnership’s youth construction academy held June 5-16 in King Salmon.



Photo by Kylene Johnson, Alaska Works Partnership Inc.

coupled with the state's aging work force, will leave a tremendous gap if Alaskans aren't trained for those jobs.

In some trade occupations, more than 50 percent of the workers are 45 or older, said Margie Germain-Antrim, a Business Partnerships program coordinator. Even at AVTEC,¹ the state's major vocational training facility, the average student is in his or her early 30s.

The U.S. Department of Labor announced the grant in July 2005 and, after negotiations, the money arrived in November. The year-long grant is due to end this November, but Geldhof said she'll ask for a time extension until June 2007. The extension would allow the Alaska Department of Labor to align its activities with the education system's calendar and serve more Alaska youth, she said. (The grant is in addition to the roughly \$20 million that Alaska gets each year from the U.S. Department of Labor to develop its work force, according to Alaska Department of Labor officials.)

Every "product" that comes out of the \$7 million – such as a class curriculum, program blueprints, "best practices" summaries and vocational training models – becomes the federal agency's property and will be posted on the Internet for other cities and states to use.

"It's not just business as usual," she said. "They're saying, 'Show us how you get industry to the table, how you're doing work force development in innovative ways.' And we can't do our job without bringing economic development to the table, and education reform," Geldhof said.

□ □ □

Nick Grubich, the principal at Mountain Village School, said he saw a difference in the high schoolers there after Welles, Bethel's career guide, had worked with them and Paul Ancell, a vocational counselor at Anchorage's Muldoon Job Center, had held a video conference with them from Anchorage to interpret their answers to a career-interest survey.

¹ Alaska Vocational Technical Center in Seward

"It is a very powerful thing for me to see when these kids are actually thinking and talking about their future," Grubich said in an email to the Bethel Job Center manager. "There was general excitement and an eager willingness on the part of the students to stay and listen well after the dismissal bell rung, very unusual for our kids."

Under formal agreements with six school districts, the career guides work in the schools – most have office space there – with students individually and in groups, and with school counselors, on everything from a good work ethic to what construction apprenticeships are like and how to use AKCIS, the Alaska Department of Labor's career information system database.

Many of the career guides worked in the state's job centers before taking the new positions, said Ken Mill, an assistant director of the Department of Labor's Employment Security Division, which received \$1.7 million of the energy grant to pay for the career guides and other programs. School districts in Bethel, Mat-Su, Juneau, Fairbanks and the Kenai Peninsula have the equivalent of one career guide each; Anchorage has two, he said.

Mill said his division is also hiring a student intern at each of the six school districts. Each career guide and the staff at the local job center will train the intern so he or she can help fellow students research career options. The interns are working up to four hours a day during school and full-time at a nearby job center in the summer, Mill said. So far, interns are in place at all but two of the six school districts, he said.

The department has also set up three other positions to work under the grant called "industry liaisons." They work directly with industry employers to create internships, opportunities for on-the-job training (where the Department of Labor subsidizes up to 50 percent of an employee's pay, usually for three to six months), and teacher "externships" (where teachers work in the industry, usually for a week or two, so teachers can relay what they've learned first-hand in an industry to their students), Mill said.

Jeff Burton, who has a mining background, and Traci Felton, a job center employment specialist, both work out of Anchorage's Midtown Job Center as the industry liaisons. Gail Phillips, the former speaker of the House, worked as a third liaison from January through June. Mill said she was critical in establishing connections with the energy industry.

ESD's \$1.7 million is also going toward "fast track[ing] the public work force system's change to a market-driven, industry centered one-stop system that is responsive to state and local economic needs," according to the division's formal agreement with Business Partnerships. Mill said that includes identifying an "apprentice point person" in each of the state's 24 job centers who knows everything there is to know about the 200 apprenticeship programs in the state, 28 of which are trade union programs involving numerous employers. The rest are small-business programs.

It also includes support for two mobile job centers – a 32-foot van with three laptops based out of Anchorage to travel the state's road system and a 20-foot one for Southeast to travel to cities and villages on the Alaska Marine Highway System. The Anchorage-based van has been on the road since April; the Southeast van will be up and running this summer, Mill said.

He said the fast-tracking also means working more with other state agencies, Native corporations, labor unions and employers. He cited some examples: A vocational counselor and a job training specialist from Anchorage's Muldoon Job Center each work out of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council's headquarters two days a week; the Department of Labor is working with the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association to train them on ALEXsys, the department's new online job seeker/work force services system; and ESD has a Department of Education representative at its meetings to design "tech prep" type courses for the schools (where high school vocational classes are aligned with apprenticeship and university requirements).

Mill said ESD is also using the \$1.7 million for individual training accounts, which is money



Photo by Kaylene Johnson, Alaska Works Partnership Inc.

Laura Wassillie of Kokhanok tries her hand at driving a 17,000-pound Kenworth tractor trailer at Alaska Works Partnership's youth construction academy June 5-16 in King Salmon. She had never driven a car before the construction driving course – now she has a driver's license and, after a year, can apply for a commercial driver's license. In the meantime, she'll be qualified to work as a flagger.

the division pays to help people in apprentice or other training programs with everything from tool belts and training tuition to travel, food and housing. Some of the mini-grants are between \$50 and \$100, but most range from \$1,800 to \$3,200, he said.

A big chunk of the \$7 million grant – \$1.35 million – is going to the nonprofit Alaska Works Partnership Inc. for its job-training programs,

including its one- to three-week construction academies. In May and June, union trainers instructed 60 17- to 24-year-olds in carpentry, electricity and construction driving at academies in St. Mary's, King Salmon, Klawock, Ninilchik and Anchorage. Alaska Works, in conjunction with school districts, Native corporations and other groups, set up the academies. Eighty to 90 percent of the students will likely land jobs in those industries, and some of those might apply for other trade apprenticeship positions, an Alaska Works spokeswoman said.

Other Alaska Works programs include Women in the Trades and an apprentice program geared toward people living in Alaska's villages. Alaska Works is also affiliated with Helmets to Hardhats, a nonprofit that connects retired military with apprenticeship slots, officials said. Mill said many of ESD's mini-grants are channeled through Alaska Works.

Business Partnerships awarded \$860,000 of the \$7 million energy grant to 14 school districts, nonprofits and industry associations that came up with innovative ways to train youth and adults or to show them what's out there as far as training, said Business Partnerships' Germain-Antrim. She said her division initially awarded "planning grants" of up to \$15,000 each – \$110,000 total – to 17 groups, which gave the groups six weeks to plan their grant proposals. Then in April, Business Partnerships awarded the \$860,000 in "implementation grants" ranging from \$25,000 to \$90,000 each to the 14 groups.

Germain-Antrim said most of the groups that received the planning grants, as well as career guides, industry liaisons and job center managers, met in Anchorage in February for a week-long conference with industry experts from oil and gas, construction, transportation and mining, and educators from schools and training providers throughout the state.

"It was incredible," Germain-Antrim said. "We learned [from industry] what they look for, how their industry works, where their biggest demand is, where they see their industry is going." (She said they learned from VECO representatives, for instance, the company has hired every avail-

able graduate from Charter College's condensed autoCAD drafting program.)

Business Partnerships awarded two of the 14 grants to the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District, including one for \$25,000 for a construction trades academy held in June for 14 Alaska vocational and math teachers. They learned real-world construction applications of what they're teaching, among other things, Germain-Antrim said.

Alaska Process Industry Careers Consortium received a \$59,000 grant for teacher externships, where 12 middle and high school teachers worked for two weeks alongside workers in the oil and gas, mining and construction industries at the Pebble mine project, Fort Knox and on the North Slope. Now the teachers will be able to pass on their experiences to their students, Germain-Antrim said. Using APICC's estimate that urban school teachers work with 130 students a day, those teachers could reach 1,560 kids.

The Alaska Hospitality Alliance was awarded \$33,000 to work with rural school districts in training 100 Alaskans ages 16 to 24 via videoconferencing for employment in the Alaska hospitality industry. The Alliance is targeting youth and young adults in villages who haven't had the chance to learn employment skills or get job experience, the first step on the road to jobs in the energy and other industries, an Alliance spokeswoman said. Once students finish their training next year – three hours a week for two semesters – they'll be in excellent standing to apply for jobs at hotels the Alliance is working with in Denali National Park and elsewhere in the state, she said.

Of the rest of the \$7 million energy grant, \$413,300 is going to AVTEC in Seward for a state-of-the-art maritime firefighting simulator, other equipment and programs, and \$110,000 is going to Kenai Peninsula College's Mining and Petroleum Training Service for mine training classes. Roughly \$2.9 million is held in reserve for continuing many of the same programs in the state fiscal year 2007 (July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007), officials said.