

Shifting student careers into high gear

County programs like TradeWINS connect teens to vocational pathways while accelerating a stronger workforce for local employers



Gabriel Sowers, a recent York High graduate, applies his skilled vocational training on a vehicle at Collision Correction.

By Melissa James
York County Contributor

Finding qualified workers remains one of the biggest challenges facing employers in across the region. York County has consistently addressed the need by creating connections between employers and students who want career alternatives to a college degree. Those connections are paying off.

Recent York High graduate Gabriel Sowers is already a full-time professional in his career goal: automotive repair. Over the past two years, he balanced traditional academics with hands-on training through [New Horizons Regional Education Centers](#) auto body program and an [apprenticeship at Collision Correction](#). This arrangement positioned him for success in a high-demand field while gaining real-world experience alongside industry professionals.

Best of all, his job at Collision Correction lets him work alongside his father, Nathan Sowers, a lead collision technician.

"My dad taught me to stay adaptable and resilient because this industry is always changing," Gabriel said. "Between him and my instructor Scott Harrel at New Horizons, I gained the skills and confidence that prepared me for this career."

For students like Gabriel, programs that combine classroom instruction with hands-on training provide a direct pathway into rewarding careers. They graduate with valuable technical skills, industry experience and professional connections that can help them transition smoothly into the workforce.



Gabriel Sowers works on a vehicle with his father, Nathan

"[The programs] taught me everything from proper repair techniques and specialized equipment to problem-solving, time management and learning through trial and error," said Gabriel.

For employers, these programs help develop a pipeline of motivated, job-ready talent.

"By investing in young talent from day one, we're able to teach proper repair procedures, quality craftsmanship and our company culture from the start," said Darryl Liechti, owner of Collision Correction. "That investment creates skilled technicians who take pride in their work and become valuable long-term members of our team."

Liechti noted that "One of the biggest surprises has been the passion and curiosity these students bring to the shop. When they're given the opportunity to work with modern technology and a team that's willing to mentor them, they're eager to learn and excited to build a career."



Gabriel and Collision Correction demonstrate exactly the kind of success story York County hopes to keep creating through its workforce development efforts. Several years back, York County Economic & Tourism Development created the TradeWINS program in partnership with York County School Division, the York County Chamber of Commerce and local employers.

Designed to showcase opportunities in skilled trades, manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, construction and other growing industries, [TradeWINS provides an innovative video series](#) to help students explore career paths they may not have previously considered. Today, every York County student watches the videos before graduation, gaining exposure to the many industries available right here in our region.

The future of our workforce depends on strong connections among businesses, educators, workforce organizations and community leaders. Those partnerships, as well as the strategies, resources and success stories that support them, will be front and center at York County's upcoming [Small Business & Workforce Development Summit](#).

Scheduled for Sept. 23 from 8:30-10:30am at the Freight Shed in Historic Yorktown, the summit will bring together employers, educators, workforce professionals, economic development leaders and community partners to discuss workforce trends, challenges and solutions. Attendees will gain valuable insights into talent attraction and retention, workforce training resources, emerging trends and collaborative strategies designed to strengthen the region's workforce pipeline.

For employers looking to recruit skilled workers, develop existing employees, connect with workforce partners or better understand the resources available to local businesses, the summit offers an opportunity to learn, share ideas and build valuable connections.

As Gabriel begins the next chapter of his career, we're reminded that workforce development isn't just about filling jobs—it's about creating opportunities, building careers and investing in the people who will shape the future of our community.

For more information on workforce development resources in the region, visit the [Hampton Roads Workforce Council](#) online.



Small Business & Workforce Development Summit

Sept. 23 | 8:30-10:30 a.m.
Yorktown Freight Shed

Business owners and community leaders are invited to attend a morning focused on workforce trends, business growth and the tools that help organizations succeed in today's economy. The summit will feature:

- Informative sessions
- Practical resources
- Valuable networking opportunities

... all designed to support local employers and strengthen the business community. Attendees will also have the opportunity to connect directly with workforce and small business resource partners.