

Schools have manufacturing mentor

By Eric Williamson, posted Feb 11, 2026 on WilmingtonBiz.com

Jon Barber fell in love with manufacturing as a young man by being on the factory floors his father managed.

But Barber, who chairs the New Hanover County Schools' Career and Technical Education (CTE) business advisory council, knows every kid doesn't get that kind of upbringing. That makes him determined to bring New Hanover County students the next best thing. His company, Wilmington Grill, is willing to come to them.

"Some of these classes or projects are going to have a product development project, a capstone project of sorts where you've got to come up with a product idea, and I'll help them walk through that process," Barber said.

He recently mentored a sophomore at Ashley High School who sought to build a multifunctional table for her dad.

"We worked with her, and then she gave us the drawings, and we put the drawings into production," Barber said.

"We had her here (at the plant) the day that we did it, so she got to see the entire process from the metal being cut to bending to welding it to assembling it."

In addition to one-on-one support, Barber gives classroom presentations, and Wilmington Grill, a family-owned business with more than a dozen employees, participates in middle school manufacturing camps and tours. Whether it's through the Career and Leadership Development Academy hosted by the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, in which seventh-graders in the district get to visit a variety of businesses, or simply an ad hoc facilities visit, the general manager makes sure the bay doors through which the company's stainless steel barbecue grills are shipped are always open to young people.

He said students often have ambitious ideas, but their concepts don't always align with real-world constraints – particularly costs. Barber helps students build methodology for practical design.

"I love talking them through that process," he said. "That's one of the things I do when we've got the tours that come in here. We'll take a sheet of stainless steel that's 6 feet by 10 feet, and during the tour, I'll show them that sheet being cut on our laser. I'll show them how much of that sheet we have to use in terms of that efficiency of material because we want to use as much of that sheet as possible."

Barber is in his second year as chair of the CTE advisory panel. He first got involved in career and technical education outreach during a Manufacturing Day event in November about 10 years ago.

Mandy Mills, the school district's CTE director, said Barber and Wilmington Grill have since become "a model of impactful, community-centered partnership."

"As chair of our advisory council, Jon provides strong leadership while actively encouraging other employers to

get involved,” Mills said. “He regularly invites students into Wilmington Grill for tours and has even modified shop equipment, so students and other visitors can better see and understand the manufacturing process.

“What has impressed me most is his genuine investment in students – not just as future employees, but as young professionals who benefit from mentorship, high expectations and meaningful industry connections,” she added.

Barber, in turn, refers to Mills, along with Laura Brogdon-Primavera, the chamber’s vice president of leadership development, and Erin Easton, vice president of CTE and economic and workforce development for Cape Fear Community College, as the “big three” drivers of technical education in New Hanover County.

“I’m lucky enough that I get to work with them and help support their activities,” he said.

Demand for skilled workers is strong in the region, but what’s less well known is the extent to which CTE gives back to businesses, Mills said. After middle-schoolers explore their interests and aptitudes for technical jobs, they “move into more focused coursework in high school, in which they can earn industry-recognized credentials, such as OSHA 10, MSSC Certified Production Technician, AutoCAD Inventor, SOLIDWORKS, etc. These aligned pathways allow students to transition seamlessly into postsecondary options at Cape Fear Community College – often while they are still in high school,” she said.

Along the way, the students benefit from firsthand experiences “so they can confirm – or refine – their interest in a particular field before making long-term career decisions,” Mills said.

Barber, despite being a lifelong disciple of technical education, said even he wasn’t always sure of his path.

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “I spent about three months working for an insurance company, and I hated it quickly.”

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