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Career Technical Education

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CHIPPEWA VALLEY SCHOOLS

CRAFTING FUTURES: DAKOTA HIGH SCHOOL'S WOODWORKING PROGRAM BUILDS SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITY

By Dean Sabelhaus

For Dakota High School woodworking teacher Mr. Chad Campau, the love of working with wood began in his grandfather's workshop.

"My grandfather was a cabinet-maker for Chris Craft boats," he recalls. "As a kid, I'd watch him work in his shop, and when I had the chance to take woodworking at Iroquois Middle School, I knew it was something I wanted to pursue."

That passion grew into a career in education that now spans 27 years—21 of them at Dakota. Inspired by his own high school woodshop teacher, the late Cliff Durand, he set his sights early on leading the program at Chippewa Valley Schools. "Mr. Durand was admired by everyone—students, colleagues, the community. He made us want to achieve, and I wanted to pick up that torch for the next generation."

Today, Dakota's woodworking program is recognized as one of the strongest in Michigan. Students start with the basics—safety, tools, and small projects—before moving on to more advanced work. Over time, they take on ambitious pieces like cabinets, beds, boats, and even custom-designed furniture. "Safety is always the foundation, but once students master that, we introduce design and creativity," Campau explains. "It's amazing to see their pride when they finish a project that is uniquely theirs."

The program doesn't just teach woodworking—it prepares students for careers. An active industry advisory board, made up of CEOs and business leaders in the local cabinetmaking and mill-work industry, provides equipment, materials, mentorship, and internships.

Local firms donate everything from sheet goods to professional-grade machinery, ensuring students train on the same technology they'll see in the workplace. "The board is incredibly generous, and their involvement opens real doors for our students," Campau says.

One highlight each year is the



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White oak desk – First Place State Award winner

MITES competition (Michigan Industrial Technology and Education Society), where Dakota students regularly shine. Over Campau's tenure, they've collected 19 Grand Awards and more than 100 first-, second-, and third-place finishes. Some students have even gone on to compete nationally at the American Woodworking Furniture Suppliers' Fresh Wood competition in Las Vegas. "It's not just about winning," he notes. "It's about having their work judged by industry professionals—and sometimes landing a job offer."

Success stories abound. One 2019 graduate, who started with little experience, used his time in Dakota's shop to build the skills and confidence to launch his own finish carpentry business. Within a year, he had multiple crews working for him.

Today, he's thriving—and serves on Dakota's advisory board to give back.

For many students, woodworking is more than a class—it's a reason to come to school. "I've had kids tell me this program was

the only thing keeping them in school," Campau says. "Some students who struggle in traditional classrooms excel here because they're hands-on, visual learners. Woodworking gives them an outlet to succeed."

The program continues to evolve with industry needs. Dakota's shop now includes CNC machines, laser engravers, vacuum presses, and modern finishing systems. In fact, students who complete at least two years in the program may soon leave with a nationally recognized industry credential.

Campau wants the community to understand the bigger picture: woodworking isn't just about building furniture—it's about building futures. "There's a shortage of skilled tradespeople in our country. Our students can walk out of high school ready for high-demand, well-paying jobs, without the burden of college debt. For others, it becomes a lifelong hobby that enriches their lives. Either way, this program gives them skills, confidence, and opportunity."



Grand Award-winning firearm cabinet.



A cedar strip canoe.



Grand Award-winning hutch.



Quarter sawn walnut armoire – State Award winner.

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