



Media Release

Three Georgia High School Skilled Trades Teachers Among 61 Finalists for 2021 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence

The three state finalists teach in Athens, Fort Valley and Gainesville

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LOS ANGELES – High school skilled trades teachers and their programs are often overlooked and underfunded. As the United States faces a critical shortage of skilled trades workers, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools is shining a spotlight on excellent public high school skilled trades programs with its annual Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Today, the program announced that three public high school teachers from Georgia have been named as finalists for the prize. The three Georgia finalists were chosen by an independent panel of judges from among a field of more than 700 skilled trades teachers who applied for the prize. The 61 finalists are from 30 states and specialize in trades including advanced manufacturing, welding, construction, automotive and agriculture mechanics.

The winners will be announced in late October. More than \$1 million in cash prizes will be shared by 18 teachers and their skilled trades programs.

“Despite the dramatic need for a new generation of workers, research has shown that most U.S. high school students do not have access to high-quality skilled trades programs. The goal of the prize is to highlight some of the most outstanding programs

nationwide and to celebrate teachers who are making a big difference in the lives of students,” said Danny Corwin, executive director of Harbor Freight Tools for Schools. “Our hope is that the stories of these dedicated teachers will inspire other communities to create similar programs for their own high school students. All high school students who want to learn a skilled trade and have a talent for working with their hands should have the same opportunity.”

These are the three Georgia finalists.

Dave Darden incorporates his 35 years of experience as a master automotive technician into his automotive service technology courses at Cedar Shoals High School in Athens, Georgia. To hone his teaching skills, Darden obtained his masters degree in workforce education in 2019 and will graduate with his Ed.S this fall. Darden’s program is ASE/NATEF-certified (a top industry standard), and prepares his students for a variety of careers in and out of the automotive industry. Former students have gone on to successful careers in the automotive world, as well as in the military, welding and engineering fields. This year, Darden’s advanced students converted a former SWAT truck into a fully-operational food truck, and transformed two school buses into bookmobiles for their school district. Darden was a finalist for the 2020 Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Jody Kemp has taught agricultural mechanics and been a Future Farmers of America advisor in Georgia for the last 26 years. He has led the agricultural mechanics curriculum at Peach County High School in Fort Valley, GA, for the last three years. As part of a robust agricultural mechanics curriculum, Kemp’s students learn construction, welding, and electrical wiring, as well as maintenance and operation of small engines, tractors, and lawnmowers. Kemp’s students compete in FFA Career Development Events in agricultural mechanics, and Kemp estimates that at least 65 percent of his former students incorporate concepts and skills learned in his classrooms in their current careers. Kemp was selected as the Teacher of the Year for Hawkinsville High School in 2018, and is an active member of the Georgia Vocational Agriculture Teacher Association.

Rodney Presley teaches HVACR (Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning & Refrigeration) and construction at Lanier College & Career Academy in Gainesville, Georgia. While running his own HVAC company, he saw first-hand the desperate need for highly skilled workers in the trades, and began teaching to remedy that. Presley’s students showcase their skills by competing in national SkillsUSA events, building products for sale in the school’s MetalWood design shop, and constructing a tiny house. Students also participate in an industry “signing day”, where they commit to

careers in the trades -- with nine students signing with employers in this past year alone. Presley leads a county-wide "Habitat High" program for advanced students in partnership with the local Habitat for Humanity, and has helped host a Skills Challenge for students with Georgia's Association of General Contractors.

The complete list of finalists is available [here](#).

There is rare bipartisan support for increased investment in skilled trades education in high school. More than 76 percent of Republicans, Democrats and Independents said they favor increased public funding for skilled trades education and think that offering skilled trades classes in high school should be a priority, according to polling by NORC at the University of Chicago. The poll was commissioned by Harbor Freight Tools for Schools.

Eric Smidt, the owner and founder of Harbor Freight Tools, said high school skilled trades programs provide a pathway not just to a good job, but also to a meaningful career and a good life.

"High school skilled trades teachers are heroes," Smidt said. "Our teachers and their programs are an essential part of meeting the national challenge of educating the next generation of skilled trades workers."

Winners join a nationwide network of outstanding trades teachers who convene throughout the year and in a three-day summer institute to share best practices and brainstorm ways to improve high school skilled trades programs.

The 2021 finalists now advance to a second round of competition, where they will be asked to respond to online expert-led learning modules designed to solicit their insights and creative ideas about teaching practices. The finalists will be asked how ideas from the modules might be used to inspire students to achieve excellence in the skilled trades. Two rounds of judging, each by separate independent panels of reviewers, will narrow the field to 18 winners and, finally, name the three Grand Prize winners and 15 additional prize winners.

Grand Prize winners will each receive \$100,000, with \$70,000 going to their public high school skilled trades program and \$30,000 to the skilled trades teacher behind the winning program. The 15 additional winners will each be awarded \$50,000, with \$35,000 going to their public high school program and \$15,000 to the teacher. Winners whose school, district and/or state policy prohibits receipt of the individual portion of

prize award were eligible to apply on behalf of their school's skilled trades program. If they win, the entire share of the prize will be awarded to the school.

Winners will be announced in late October.

About Harbor Freight Tools for Schools

Harbor Freight Tools for Schools is a program of The Smidt Foundation, established by Harbor Freight Tools owner and founder Eric Smidt, to advance excellent skilled trades education in U.S. public high schools. With a deep respect for the dignity of these fields and for the intelligence and creativity of people who work with their hands, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools aims to drive a greater understanding of and investment in skilled trades education, believing that access to quality skilled trades education gives high school students pathways to graduation, opportunity, good jobs, and a workforce our country needs. Harbor Freight Tools is a major supporter of the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools program. For more information, visit: harborfreighttoolsforschools.org
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