

Construction Careers Center prepares first graduating class

The charter school was started four years ago to help develop a work force for construction and engineering trades.

BY JEFFREY TOMICH
Of the Post-Dispatch

Aaron Miller and Alicia Moore are typical of high school seniors in a spirited-but-friendly contest to be valedictorian.

With just 11 days until graduation, Miller's 3.67 grade-point average just bests Moore's 3.54. Miller is president of an after-school club and helps tutor other students. Moore is student body president, a cheerleader and has part-time jobs at Imo's Pizza and St. Louis Bread Co.

What distinguishes the two students, both 18, is that they're part of the first class to graduate from the Construction Careers Center, a St. Louis charter school started four years ago to help develop a work force for local construction and engineering companies.

The school, at 1224 Grattan Street in St. Louis, is sponsored by Associated General Contractors. It was the first charter school in the nation dedicated solely to construction trades, which face a seemingly perpetual demand for skilled workers.



PHOTOS BY KEVIN MANNING / POST-DISPATCH

Michael Kent (left) and Alen Makic, students at the Construction Careers Center, receive instruction from carpentry teacher Mike Tofari. Makic is a senior and Kent will graduate next year.

As such, students, teachers and board members know the school's success will be measured in part by the success of the inaugural class.

"This first class will set the tone in a lot of ways," said Michael Tofari, a teacher of juniors and seniors and a journeyman carpenter. "It sets the reputation of the school."

To be sure, the school has been forced to overcome numerous obstacles to produce its first graduates. Among the biggest has been attrition: Of the 117 freshmen who enrolled in 2001, just 28 will be getting diplomas later this month. A half-dozen or so others must complete summer school to finish.

"There's no question that this first class was a learning curve for all of us," said Richard Ledbetter, interim chairman of the school's seven-member board and a vice president of St. Louis-based Castle Contracting.

Miller chose to attend the Construction Careers Center over three other charter schools, but initially wasn't happy. Twice he asked his parents to let him transfer to another school — once when he was a freshman and again as a sophomore.

Now, he's glad he stayed. This fall, Miller plans to either attend college or enter a four-year apprenticeship program to become an electrician. He eventually hopes to teach math.



Alicia Moore puts the finishing touches on a design piece derived from the work of Piet Mondrian in Tony Biere's art class. The exercise was designed to teach the students to think of their work as art.

Moore picked the school over joining ROTC after visiting a boot camp. She, too, wanted to transfer to another school during her first year, but she's now glad her grandmother made her stay. She plans to be a cement mason and a teacher after graduating from Harris-Stowe State College.

Miller, Moore and other graduating students are proof that the school is effective — despite some

of its struggles, said Nancy Remak-lus, a special education teacher and operator of the school store, the Bobcat Den.

"I believe in vocational education," she said. "Not every kid is college-bound. I think a lot of high schools focus only on the college bound and forget everyone else."

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