

DENVER AND THE WEST

Most advanced woodworking lab in the country sits inside Colorado classroom

About \$700,000 worth of donated equipment makes up the lab where students work and learn

By **Elizabeth Hernandez**

The Denver Post

POSTED: 10/25/2015 12:01:00 AM MDT

PEYTON — When the Peyton school district superintendent heard about a woodworking instructor who was shaking things up in Oregon, he decided to bring the man and his program to Colorado. "I was looking for something for these kids to grab on to," Superintendent Tim Kistler said. "I saw what Dean (Mattson) was doing, and I said we need it here."

In Oregon, Mattson partnered with industry leaders and created in-demand woodworking classes that drew hundreds of students.

Now, he's attempting to make lightning strike twice by converting an abandoned schoolhouse in Peyton — northeast of Colorado Springs — into a manufacturer's oasis with enough professional equipment for experts to deem it the most advanced woodworking lab in the country.

Students from Peyton Junior High and High School, along with a few teens from surrounding rural areas, file into their lofty classroom stocked with the best tools and machinery in the world. Donning protective glasses, the students check in with their instructor, Dean Mattson, and get cracking on their projects — a small cabinet.

"I never thought I'd be able to do this," said 15-year-old Josh Gonzales, as he looked over his cabinet design. Mattson gestured to the swarm of banners on the walls listing more than 30 industry partnerships that fund and provide materials for Peyton's wood manufacturing program.

"This is what makes it possible," he said. "It's not your dad's woodshop."

Mattson was a successful businessman who broke into wood manufacturing education in Oregon. His business-oriented mind thought to partner with industry leaders who donated professional equipment in exchange for training potential future employers — the students.

With exciting, new machinery and the lure of high-paying jobs after graduation, Mattson's woodworking class filled up quickly with more than 500 students on the waiting list.

When Kistler, superintendent for Peyton School District 23-JT, heard about Mattson's program in the Pacific Northwest, he dreamed of bringing a similar class to Colorado.

In February, Mattson made the move from Oregon to Peyton to spread his wood manufacturing philosophy to Peyton High School's 200 students.

About \$700,000 of donated equipment from corporations around the world outfitted the former cafeteria of an abandoned school down the road from Peyton High School with top-notch machinery and tools.

Classes started in August with 40 students getting bused to the lab for Mattson's two-hour classes throughout the day.

Haylie Peterson, 13, is the first eighth-grader to get involved in Mattson's program.

"I'm absolutely loving it," Peterson said. "It's my favorite class. It's hands-on, and we get to build what we imagine."

Peterson said she is considering going into wood manufacturing. She is humbled by the quality of the equipment and professional training she has access to.

"I appreciate everybody who cares about this little town of Peyton," she said. "I mean, we don't even have a gas station, but we have this."

Mattson said he treats his students as customers — with respect and the expectation of professional behavior — to prepare them for the real world.

"It's not about the money and the prestige," Mattson said. "It's about the kids."

Just don't make the mistake of calling his program woodshop.

"Woodshop is where you make birdhouses," he said. "Wood manufacturing is where we take kids who are often ignored and give them professional training on real-world machinery so they can get high-paying jobs out of school."

With interest in Mattson's curriculum around the world, the next endeavor is opening the National Woods Manufacturing Training Center.

Mattson is searching for a 25,000-square-foot facility, preferably in Colorado Springs, where he can train educators on his teaching methods and machinery and provide a "finishing school" for his students once they graduate. Mattson said wood industry leaders already have committed to more than \$2 million of technology to outfit the training center.

On Monday and Tuesday, executives from across the globe will gather in Peyton's abandoned schoolhouse to check out the new digs and their prospective employees.

"I had no idea it would be this big," Kistler said. "It's overwhelming, but it's so good for our kids — for our town."

Elizabeth Hernandez: 303-954-1223 or ehernandez@denverpost.com