

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

# Vocational schools, home to one-eighth of Mass. high school students seek aid to grow more

By **Christopher Huffaker** Globe Staff, Updated October 9, 2024, 12:01 a.m.



Kyra Matos (center), a junior at Greater Lawrence Tech, poked her head between her classmates in plumbing to get their opinion as the class worked to solder pipes. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

**F**ITCHBURG — Since he was 12, Christian Lees-Morel had his career mapped out. Being good with his hands, and having seen his uncles earn good money in the skilled trades, Lees-Morel would go to the [local trade school](#) with a friend, then

they would temporarily split up: Lees-Morel would become an electrician, the friend a plumber, and they would go into business together flipping houses.

The plan hit a snag four years ago. The friend got into Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School and is well on his way to entering his trade — but Lees-Morel didn't because of poor marks in eighth grade. He went to Gardner High School.

Lees-Morel was one of the thousands of Massachusetts students each year who are [locked out of the state's trade high schools](#), which are straining at the seams after decades of growing interest.

But this year, Lees-Morel, now a senior, got a second chance. The trade school, known locally as Monty Tech, has a new program, dubbed MVP, in partnership with three area high schools that lets students learn trades at Monty Tech while taking traditional academic courses at their high schools. Lees-Morel became one of the program's inaugural students this fall, taking electrical training at Monty Tech every other week. His career plan is back on.

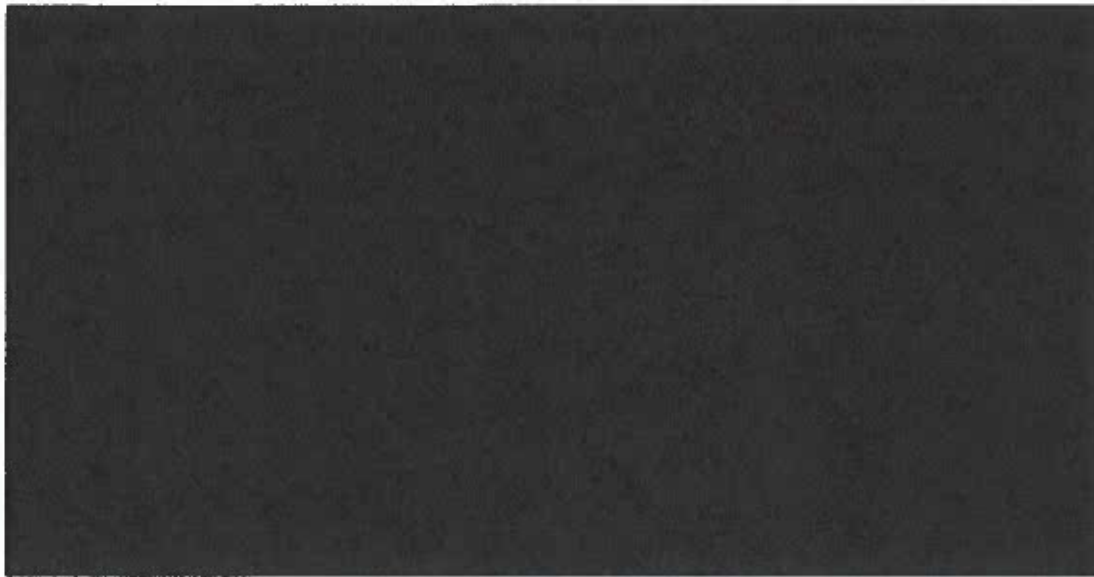


Richy Dominguez sent a piece of pipe into a machine that heats it at his Electrical Technology class at Greater Lawrence Tech. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Lees-Morel is a beneficiary of one of the ways the state's celebrated vocational schools are expanding to meet growing demand, but school leaders say they're running out of options, and they need more state funds to keep up. The schools today serve about one in eight public high school students statewide, but decades of growth have resulted in overcrowded workspaces as well as admissions wait lists that keep out the neediest students who could benefit the most from their offerings. The schools are advocating for a new funding mechanism that would let them expand capacity incrementally and bring in thousands more students.

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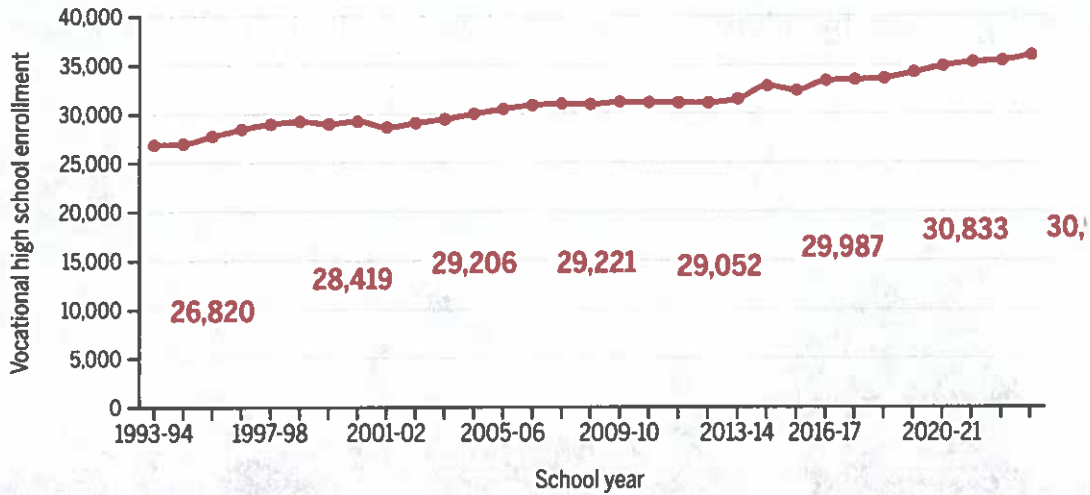
The schools have come under intense criticism for how many of them allocate those in-demand seats: using selective criteria such as grades, attendance, and discipline records to rank order students, a process that a prior Globe analysis found disproportionately excludes marginalized students. Students of color, those from low-income families, English learners, and learners with disabilities are less likely to get admitted. Acting education commissioner Russell Johnston recently announced a review of the admissions policies, and Governor Maura Healey said in a statement that she intends to make changes to “better ensure all Massachusetts students have equal access to career and technical education.”

Some advocates have called for a switch to lottery admissions, but even they agree that expanding seats is part of the answer. On that, the school leaders agree.

“Why are we fighting over admissions when we can fix the problem?” said Charlie Ellis, chair of the Nashoba Valley Technical School Committee.

### Vocational school enrollment on the rise

Total Massachusetts public high school enrollment has been stagnant for about 20 years, but vocational schools keep growing. Today, about 1 in 8 Massachusetts public high school students attend the schools.



SOURCE: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF

\* A Flourish chart

Vocational schools such as Nashoba Tech have been taking in a growing share of the state’s high school students for two decades. Rising achievement beginning about 20 years ago drove increased student interest in the schools, and in recent years the [rise in college tuition](#) has [pushed more young people toward the trades](#). They now serve about 36,000 students statewide, up more than a fifth since 2004.

About 40 percent of applicants each year — 6,000 students — are left without a seat. And [demand for vocational school graduates](#) has grown: expanding the workforce of key industries such as [health care](#) and [renewable energy](#) has become a state priority.

The schools have not sat idly by. A half-dozen have embarked on massive School Building Authority-backed rebuilds since 2009, spending as much as \$300 million in state and local funds to expand seats. Others have expanded incrementally, winning small grants and often saving money by relying on their staff and students to do the renovation work.



Aaliyah Rocker (L) looked up at the clock as she took her classmates' pulses inside their Health Assisting class at Greater Lawrence Tech. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

But school leaders — and the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators — say most of the cheap projects have been done, so they're calling for the Legislature to create a new vocational school building program with \$5 million to \$25 million grants for modest additions. They point to a new modular building at Nashoba Valley Tech as an example of what they could achieve.

That expansion cost about \$3.75 million and took just 19 months to build. It now offers the school's robotics and engineering program state-of-the-art robotic tools, plus room to

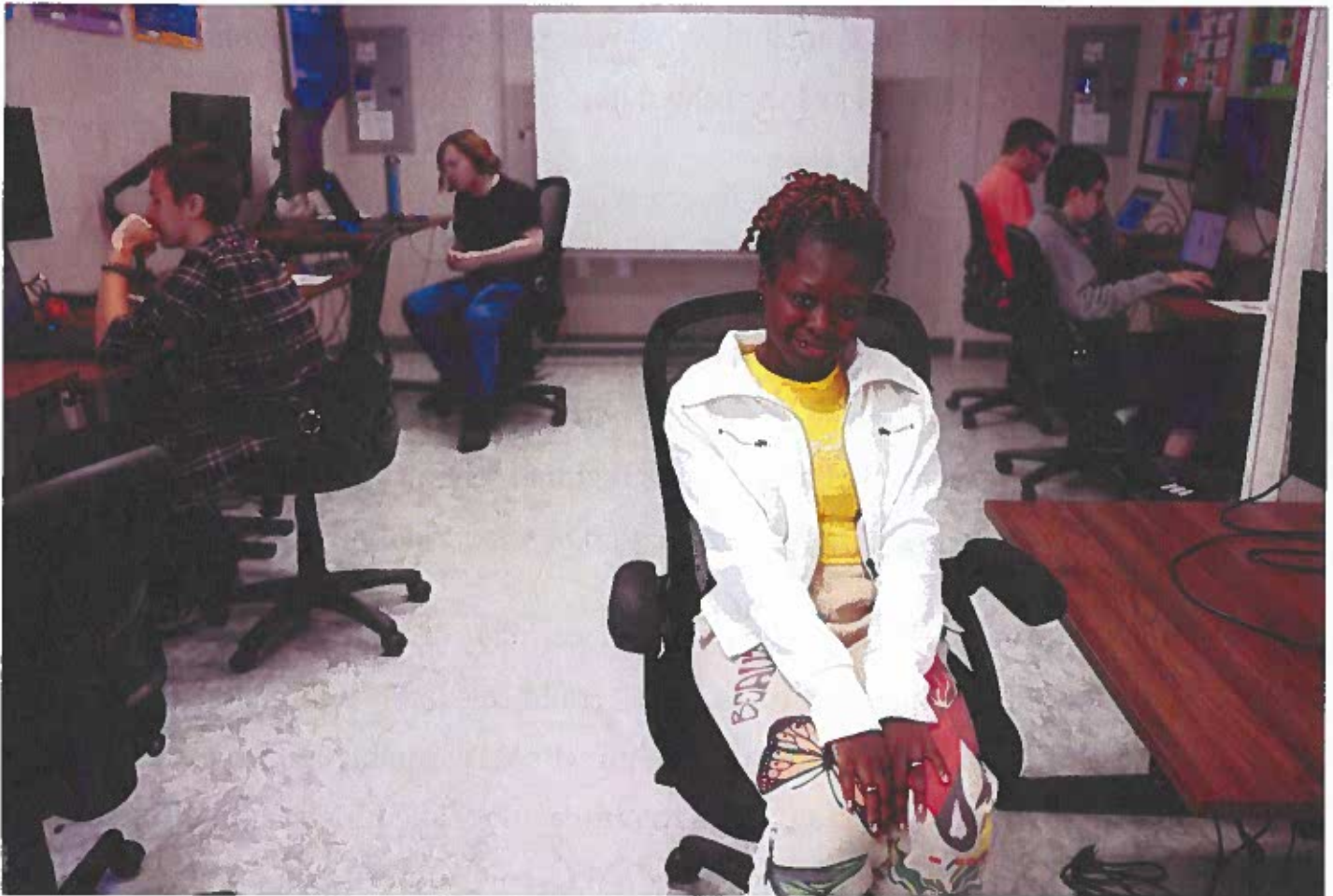
grow for the fledgling programming and web development program, which was previously stuck in a dark corner of the school library.

“We can finally breathe fresh air,” said Amira White, a senior from Pepperell in programming and web development.

The modular building has spillover effects, allowing for an expansion of the electrical program, the school’s fastest-growing trade, among other things. And relatively speaking, it cost very little — but more than many of the regional schools can afford, said Steve Sharek, director of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators.

The state’s building authority isn’t a good option for many of the projects the schools have in mind: it funds complete rebuilds, which could cost half a billion dollars per school. The already enormous cost of a new high school is even higher for vocational schools, with their special features such as reinforced floors and high ceilings for auto shops and machine rooms. Even if a school wins building authority support, it only reimburses partial costs.





Amira White, a senior majoring in programming and web design, sat in a classroom at Nashoba Valley Tech. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The rest must come from member communities, and that is a political challenge. On one side are communities that feel their students don't attend in large enough numbers for the cost to be worthwhile. For example, voters rejected a proposed \$444.6 million rebuild of Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School this year. On the other are working-class communities such as Christian Lees-Morel's Gardner High that enroll in the trade schools in droves — but their home districts would lose state aid, allocated on a per-student basis, if even more students departed for the regional vocational schools, which are separate school districts. (That's partly why, for academic classes, Lees-Morel will remain at Gardner: that way his state money can stay there.)

In Andover, Greater Lawrence Technical School has grown internally over the last decade, expanding enrollment by 50 percent to 1,800. Federal pandemic relief funds helped it add some programs, including an early education one that doubles as a day care



for staff's children. An "After Dark" program lets nearby teenagers attend technical training in the afternoon.

Still, more than 1,000 students are wait listed each year.

John Lavoie, Greater Lawrence Tech superintendent, wants to purchase a nearby building and refurbish it, creating a new home to expand the health careers programs.

On a Thursday morning soon after the start of the school year, health-assisting program students, including Abigail Libby, 17, were forced to squeeze past each other as they navigated the cramped simulated hospital ward.

"There's beds all along the walls," Libby said. "We're always bumping into each other."

"Our medical programs are bursting at the seams," said Lindsey Gangi, the school's technical education coordinator.



Yeriel Hiciano, Jason Deras, and Nethan Jimenez looked at their computers as they worked in their automotive class at Greater Lawrence Tech. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Rehousing the health programs would also let other classes, such as electrical, expand.

Lou DeVito, a project manager at Nardone Electric, said he regularly brings in electrical students from Greater Lawrence as co-ops and hires the graduates.

“The electrical trade is in such a high demand,” DeVito said. “It’s definitely more attractive to try to work with the schools, because otherwise they have to train from scratch.”

State Representative Frank Moran, a Greater Lawrence Tech alum, wants to multiply that opportunity.

“I get calls every summer, once they start sending out letters of acceptance: Parents calling to see if they can get their kids in,” Moran said.

Moran sponsored an amendment to include \$300 million for vocational school grants in a proposed state economic development bill, but it didn’t make it in. He also has a bill to create a special \$3 billion School Building Authority program for the schools. Either proposal would have to be taken up in a future legislative session.

Sharek, of the vocational administrators group, argued that the money could come from the state’s “millionaire’s tax,” an extra 4 percent tax on incomes over \$1 million passed in 2022 and intended to fund education and transportation. [It generated about \\$2.2 billion](#) last year.

The vocation schools already appeal to all sorts of students.

Back at Monty Tech, it’s not just teenagers with concrete plans to become a tradesperson who are enrolling. One of Lees-Morel’s new classmates, Fitchburg High School senior Miavette Concepción, has no experience or family in the trades.

But when Monty Tech announced its hybrid program last spring, Concepción was intrigued. She likes math and thought it might come in handy as an electrician. A month in, it's everything she hoped for, she said.

"I feel like I'm genuinely learning and picking up on things," Concepción said. "I'm really enjoying it so far and very grateful for the opportunity."

*Globe staff writer Mandy McLaren contributed to this story.*

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