

# 2025 ASE INSTRUCTOR TRAINING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS



**MOTOR AGE**

*Excellence in automotive education*

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# Editor's Note




**T**he 2025 ASE Instructor Training Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, displayed the industry's top classroom leaders, each with a desire to drive automotive education forward for this generation and beyond. From veteran instructors celebrating decades of service to innovative software solutions addressing modern teaching challenges, these stories highlight the people and programs shaping today's automotive aftermarket.

The educators within these pages demonstrate that success in automotive

education goes beyond technical know-how—it requires mentorship, advocacy, and a commitment to lifelong student success. Whether it's Ken Kunz's 35 years of creating opportunities for students at Yellowstone National Park, Cade Kroeger's transition from technician to university educator, or Andrew Smith's mission to increase Black representation in the industry, these stories illustrate how great educators transform lives and careers.

You'll also get a look at the practical challenges facing today's automotive programs, from funding limitations to instruc-

tor shortages, and you'll learn how industry partnerships and innovative technology can help bridge these gaps. Instructors like Richard Cox and Ron Denning offer valuable perspectives to students and peers on what it takes to sustain and grow a quality automotive education program with the help of ASE.

These educators are the lifeblood of the automotive industry's future, ensuring that students will earn more than technical training, but also the friendship, mentorship, and support needed to develop fulfilling automotive service careers. 

# ASE Education Foundation names 2025 instructor of the year

*Illinois-based teacher Ken Kunz of Waubonsee Community College is honored for 35 years of educational service*

BY CHRIS JONES

**MIKE COLEY, PRESIDENT** of the ASE Education Foundation, presented Ken Kunz, an automotive instructor at Waubonsee Community College in Plano, Illinois, with the 2025 ASE Education Foundation Instructor of the Year award.

The distinction, a lifetime achievement award given by the ASE Education Foundation, recognizes outstanding high school or college instructors from ASE Accredited automotive, diesel/truck, or collision repair programs who demonstrate exceptional personal dedication and commitment to students pursuing technical careers in the automotive industry.

Coley stated that the purpose of the ASE Instructor Training Conference is to bring together automotive instructors from around the country, making it a fitting venue to honor the winning educators before their peers, something the Foundation started last year.

Kuntz, an ASE Certified Master technician, was recognized for his 30 years in automotive education—five years with Lincoln Tech and 30 years with Waubonsee Community College, and his close connection with his students. He said that while he intends to retire in 2025, he won't close the door on a return to his automotive career.

In receiving his distinction, Kuntz thanked his wife, ASE, his colleagues, industry partners, and the students he's taught over the years.

"I've had a very successful career, and as educators, the way we measure the success of our career is by the success of our students. And I've had a lot of very successful students here," Kuntz said. "Actually, one of my past students I had 30 years ago, (who I) didn't know was here, came up to say hello to me."

Kuntz shared other stories as he reflected on his career, crediting ASE

for creating opportunities for him and his students to succeed.

"One of the big doors that opened up for us is Yellowstone National Park. For the past 28 years, my students have worked in Yellowstone National Park. If you visit Yellowstone, you'll see Waubonsee pennants in every service station," he said.

Kuntz added that being an ASE Accredited program has also opened up manufacturer-based training for his students, noting that his school has gained training opportunities with Mopar, Toyota, Nissan, and Mercedes. He encouraged educators in the room to think about what's going to benefit their students most and set them up for career-long success.

"You want to look for opportunities for your students," Kuntz said. "As my (college's) president said, 'Somebody takes you to the dance, now it's your turn to take somebody to the dance.'" 📌





## From lube tech to legacy builder: Why Caid Kroeger left the shop to shape tomorrow's young technicians

*Caid Kroeger returned to his alma mater to give students the same opportunities he had—and help them become collectively smarter than their instructors*

BY CHRIS JONES

**CAID KROEGER IS THE DEGREE** coordinator and assistant professor of automotive courses at Weber State University.

The 33-year-old started his career in automotive as a 20-year-old lube tech at a Chevy dealership. At the dealership, he met mentor and

eventual Weber State automotive instructor Scott Holland, who took him on as an apprentice within the dealership and invested four years in training and mentoring him.

After leaving the dealership to pursue an associate degree at Weber State, Kroeger was assigned Holland

as his instructor on “the first day of school.” Kroeger graduated in 2019 and left Utah to work for Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan. After COVID hit, he returned to Utah and dealership work, “teaching, service writing, and then working into assistant service managing,” he said.

He transitioned from the dealership to the college in Weber State’s automotive department three years ago when he was contacted and told he’d be perfect for an instructor position. He applied, and three years later, he remains passionate about educating the next generation of automotive technicians.

Today, he shares why he chose to become an educator.

**Q: Did you see automotive education as your career path?**

**Caid Kroeger:** Not at all. I will tell you that right now. I wake up every day, and I’m like, this is surreal. I would never have thought that I would have ever been in academia. I honestly thought I was going to be a technician the rest of my life; I was content working on cars. But I was dead set on doing a two-year associate degree and then being a technician for the rest of my life.

When I was at Weber State, manufacturers started coming in. Ford Motor Company, Chrysler, GM would come in every now and then, and Sherwin Williams would come in because they do automotive paint stuff. I started to see that there was more to the automotive industry than just being a technician.

**Q: Can you walk me through a day in your life?**

**Kroeger:** At Weber State, I manage everything on the associate and bachelor’s degree side of our automotive service program. I handle curriculum-related tasks, syllabi, and have input on what instructors teach and scheduling. The department chair still has to sign off, but I’m responsible for making sure our automotive service technology degree pathway is successful, and students get through the program.

I came back to Weber because

I want to give students the same opportunities I had. I’m not going to be a millionaire doing this, but I got into mentoring in the industry. When Weber offered me this position, I saw an opportunity to help students have those experiences and follow whatever they want to do in their lives. I was a lube tech, worked my way through A-line tech, service writing, and all that. I want them to be successful.

**Q: In terms of developing and building the curriculum for your students, how are you doing that, and then how is ASE involved?**

**Kroeger:** ASE is involved because they have their task list, which gives us our framework for what we teach. We’re a master accredited school, so it gives us our framework. But ASE has been very helpful in getting us the contacts to succeed. Yes, we are a big automotive school. Everyone in the automotive industry seems to know where Weber State is, but you’d be surprised at how many people outside the automotive industry don’t know that Weber State actually has an automotive program.

Our partnership with ASE really started to grow over the last three years. It’s due to the entire faculty supporting ASE. What ASE has helped us do is get contacts with Phi-Tech, Milwaukee, and all these other companies to help our program grow. At the end of the day, yes, I’m at a big university, but I still have the same issues that every other two-year college does. I need funding, I need tools, I need cars, I need all this other stuff. Yes, we have this grand program, but we have to be very creative with how we get our stuff through grant writing, resources, and trying to get donations.

**Q: What does success look like for you in this role?**

**Kroeger:** Success to me is my students being able to get out into the job force and have a successful career. I want to see them achieve their dreams. I want them to see what I did.

Here in academia, we rate students based on A, B, C, D just to get them through. That’s just the way the scaling has to work. But I don’t like to justify that as success. The reason is because we are in automotive. Not everyone is a math major, English major, or chemist. Yes, you do have to know all those principles in automotive. They’ve always been a hands-on type of learner for the most part.

My version of success is that they’re my legacy. Those students that come out of our program are taught by John Kelly. People in the automotive industry know who John Kelly is. Scott Holland, Stevenson, me, Scott Hadzik. That one student that has gone through all of our courses has all of our knowledge in him. Each one of those students is Weber State’s legacy. They’re the ones that carry our name into the industry, that make it so when Ford is like: “Who do we need to get or who do we need to reach out to? Weber State University, because we love their students.” That’s success to me.

We have a 99% job placement rate, and that has me tickled pink. I just want my students to be successful in life. I want them to achieve their goals and dreams, and I do take pride in all of them because that’s my knowledge walking down the street. That’s John Kelly’s knowledge walking down the street. That’s a byproduct of five people teaching them all we know about cars. So, they should be collectively smarter than all of us at that point. That’s the goal. I want the students to know more than I do eventually in life. ■



## Giving 100% back

*Richard Cox, Automotive Technology Division  
Chair at Fort Hays Tech North Central*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**AFTER GRADUATING** from Fort Hays Tech North Central in Kansas, Richard Cox spent around 20 years in the trade, working for General Motors among other automotive companies. One day, his wife, a hair stylist, happened to be cutting Cox's former mentor's hair when he asked her to tell Cox that he was retiring from teaching. Cox had unsuccessfully applied a few times in the past, but this time, he didn't wait a single second. He won the role, and not long after starting, he got a surprise visit from his mentor, who congratulated him before asking for his help fixing his truck's brakes. Now, Cox aims to be that guide for the next generation of automotive service professionals.

**Q: How long have you been an educator?**

**Richard Cox:** Thirteen years.

**Q: What got you started as an educator?**

**Cox:** Well, I graduated in '92 from the school I now teach at. That teacher was my mentor, and I really liked him and what he did. I told him, "I'm going to come back one day and teach here." He laughed and said, "Okay, boy. If you do, let me know." When I got the job, I reached out to my previous mentor and they did a write-up in the newspaper titled, "Graduate returns to give back to the next generation."

I just love seeing students learn something -- learn a career. When students don't know something and then that lightbulb moment hits, and they get that look like, "Hey, I can do this." I tell them, "Yes, you can -- just pay attention and listen to what we're teaching."

I believe that teaching is the great-

est thing in the world. You have to have passion and patience. Without patience, you're not going to make it.

**Q: Did you have any prior experience as an educator?**

**Cox:** When I first started, I truly didn't know much about teaching. But I was told, "Don't worry, we'll teach you how to teach. Just take your knowledge and apply it." I was fortunate to be mentored by some great educators.

Those mentors told me, "Richard, if you ever stop having fun, quit. You're not doing the students any favors." I really took that to heart, and now I wake up every morning excited for new teaching, the new sessions, and the new students.

There's a shortage of good technicians. I believe that the more we share and help each other, the better our industry will become. I always tell my students: take what you've learned and apply it. If you see someone struggling, help them. The more you know, the more you can teach, and the better your shop will be.

**Q: What does the automotive industry mean to you?**

**Cox:** I believe that the automotive industry is a good and rewarding career. It can be frustrating and physically demanding, but I was able to put two girls through college because of my career choices, and they're both married and doing well. I've been married 36 years, and it's been a blessing. Now, I'm giving back 100 percent to the industry that got me through life.

I tell my wife I've got 11 years left. She says, "You're never going to retire. Even if you're not teaching at the college, you'll be doing something in the industry, you'll be teaching, doing something with ASE." And you know what, she's right. ■



## How the industry can fill in the gaps in automotive education

*Ron Denning, instructor at Grandville High School in  
Grandville, MI, at the ASE Instructor Conference*

BY XXX

Aside from working as an instructor at Grandville High School in Michigan, Ron Denning also serves as an officer in his teachers' union and as a dedicated advocate for education. He's seen firsthand how teacher shortages impact student performance and how easily automotive programs can disappear from schools, and while he's quick to recognize the support automotive education gets from school administrations and industry members, he's still pushing for a better environment for future automotive technicians.

**Q: How long have you been an educator?**

**Ron Denning:** I started teaching an engine class maybe 10 or 15 years ago and now I'm in my 25th year of teaching. In the last couple of years, I've been teaching a new automotive

maintenance and repair class which is an introductory course for students who don't really know anything about cars. My district is building a new facility, and we're launching a new curriculum where students will have the opportunity to take two new classes and then sit for ASE certification tests, and that's where I'll be teaching in the future.

**Q: From your point of view, what would you say is one of the biggest obstacles you face as an instructor?**

**Denning:** Funding. My district is really good about supporting us, but they have limitations. That's why, with the new program, they're trying to get industry sponsors to help us out. For example, a local business with a foundation donated a lot of money for our new facility and that is important

because school districts are limited in their local, state, and federal funding. There's only so much to go around.

If the industry can step up and help out (many already do), it would really benefit districts. It would be great to see even more of that.

**Q: How else can the industry step up and fill in the gaps left by the education system?**

**Denning:** If we're talking about shortcomings and how industry can help, a big issue is finding qualified instructors. As they're incredibly hard to find. In our district, specifically in tech ed --- not just automotive --- we struggle. You get people from the industry who transition into teaching, but even then, it's tough.

If we want real change and more students going into these fields, we need qualified teachers. Some counties have tech centers, but they can only take so many students. Two counties near us are constantly turning students away because they don't have qualified instructors. That's why they're all in favor of us building this new facility and creating new opportunities.

**Q: There has to be some fear that higher ed institutions will look at those program numbers and say, "It's not worth it anymore." How do you deal with that?**

**Denning:** That's another issue. Teachers like me could retire soon; I'm not going to, but I could. Many teachers in these areas delay retirement because they're afraid the program will die without them. Some schools don't have these programs anymore and it's not because they don't want them, but because they don't have anyone to teach them. That's why I'll probably keep teaching longer than I planned. I don't want to see the program disappear. ■

# Software solutions help automotive educators overcome modern teaching challenges

*Digital tools address student engagement and hands-on training gaps*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION** of automotive technicians isn't easy. Skilled2Hire's Elie Massabki, who presented "Software to Increase Teacher Efficiency and Help Students Succeed" at Tuesday's ASE Instructor Training Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, discussed improving efficiency as a teacher and helping students succeed.

Attending educators shared their most common challenges, ranging from difficulties with student attention spans and limited resources for hands-on training to methods to increase students' success.

Through Skilled2Hire, instructors have two software suites designed to help increase their effectiveness and create additional opportunities for their students: TaskMentor and EdGame.

## **TaskMentor: Digital documentation and remote oversight**

TaskMentor lets educators manage electronic task sheets of over 500 ASE automotive repair tasks across 12 programs. Educators can inspect, comment, rate, and grade each sheet, and students can upload photos and videos of the work performed. This enables hands-on learning even when instructors can't be there and gives educators the ability to check work remotely. Both educators and students have access to the documentation, giving students a permanently accessible "cheat sheet" with all of the relevant notes, comments, and media.

TaskMentor also helps automotive students find jobs by providing lab

training records that can be shared with advisors and employers. Employers can feel more confident about hiring students thanks to the video documentation attached to each task. The added documentation also helps protect educators and school reputations, and TaskMentor is Canvas/LMS compatible.

## **EdGame: Gamified learning to increase engagement**

EdGame provides brief, daily exercises attached to leaderboards to encourage student participation. Gamifying the experience motivates students to visit and revisit the material. Instructors can assign up to 21 ASE learning modules to students, with each module having three levels of difficulty. All questions follow the ASE standards, and educators can easily track student participation to see where students are struggling. There's also the opportunity to offer extra credit or a reward for being on top of the leaderboard.

## **Key insights from automotive educators**

Student career paths and industry retention Attendees agreed that the majority of their students began at dealerships and franchises, with roughly 20% of students choosing not to go into the automotive industry.

## **Skill gaps impacting student success**

Attendees said their students struggled with electrical knowledge and training,



as well as soft skills, such as interviewing, interpersonal communication, customer service, and "common sense."

## **Industry demands and expectations**

An industry survey of 100 dealerships and repair shops reported that operators want students with more hands-on training, improved work ethics, and consistent attendance, as well as more clarity on students' true abilities.

## **Educational challenges in modern automotive training**

Some of the biggest challenges educators face revolve around the fact that hands-on training is much more difficult. The complexity of today's vehicles is key to establishing basic skills. Resource allocation and administrative issues were also listed. ■



## Breaking barriers: Andrew Smith talks ASE certification and Black excellence in automotive education

*Pflugerville, Texas, high school instructor opens up about representation, professional standards, and blazing trails for the next generation*

BY CHRIS JONES

**ANDREW SMITH ORIGINALLY** planned to attend the Conservatory of Recording Arts and Science in Phoenix, Arizona, as a musician who played drums, keyboard, and organ for his church. Smith, however, pivoted during his senior year of high school when representatives from Nashville Auto Diesel College

visited his Alabama high school. It sparked his interest in automotive technology, leading him to recognize and accept his natural mechanical ability—he's a third-generation technician after his father and grandfather—and pursue formal training.

After graduating from tech school in 2000, Smith began his career at a

Lincoln-Mercury dealership, where he discovered the depth of manufacturer training and ASE certifications. Over his 20-plus-year career, he's become a master certified technician before transitioning to education in 2020 during COVID-19, when his cousin, a school resource officer, alerted him to an opening

at Pflugerville High School. Now in his fifth year as an automotive instructor, Smith is passionate about increasing Black representation in the automotive industry and helping students understand the lucrative career opportunities available in skilled trades.

**Q: Looking back at your time as a technician, in your estimation, how many other Black techs have you come across in your career?**

**Smith:** I've been doing this for 20-plus years, and it's a handful—probably three. I'm not talking about a lube tech or somebody who works in general repairs. I'm talking about someone who actually has their certifications. They may not be a master, and I've never met a Black master certified technician. So, I'm going to say three, seriously.

**Q: What do you attribute that to? What do you think is the disconnect between the Black community and automotive repair?**

**Smith:** Exposure. When you think about it, a lot of times when we came up in our neighborhoods, we had the neighborhood mechanic. You know, it was Uncle Ray or Uncle Joe. I had my Uncle Greg and I had my Uncle Gene, so if you had a car problem, you just went to them. You never associated car repairs with taking it in for service. So, you grow up with that, and then you learn from them. And if you're not exposed to the industry, then you just do the same thing that they did. So that's where shade tree mechanics came from. There are a lot of shade tree mechanics, and if they're not exposed to industry, then you're stuck. You don't know how to get past that.

I think my benefit was when I saw my uncle working at the Ford dealership; he gave me exposure

to the dealership. But then, how do you get into that space was the next question. And of course, the training pathway got me into that. So, I think the limitation is we're not exposed to that. We're exposed to sports, we're exposed to culture, we're exposed to career paths through going to universities and colleges, and things like that. But as a trade, we're not exposed to automotive.

**Q: As an educator, how have you advocated automotive careers to Black youths who are looking for a career path and career options?**

**Smith:** Honestly, that's a good question because I'm trying to get into a space where I can educate our Black community. And honestly, we have to change the narrative. Again, for most Black kids who go to school, it's sports. It's athletics. There are other fields like robotics, computer science, or something like that. We tend to shy away from those areas.

I think my biggest purpose is to bring (industry) awareness because we do need automotive technicians, right? So, you bring that awareness that there's a demand. So, now if there's a demand, then that means that that demand needs to be filled, and who is it being filled by? And of course, now that I'm in education, I have to arm myself with knowledge because knowledge is power.

**Q: How has ASE been instrumental in your journey as an educator?**

**Smith:** Man, everything. I hear a lot of people talk down about (ASE) and say you don't need those certifications. Of course, you hear that when you first start off, and you think, "I've got a job, so I don't need the paper." But, being a Black man in the industry, I probably wouldn't have the doors that opened up for

me without those ASEs. I'm just being honest about it.

I started working in the shop, and honestly, the area I grew up in Mississippi is predominantly white. I was the only Black employee at the time. So, what do you have to stand on? Because if I make a mistake, it sticks out like a sore thumb.

So, those are some things that I had to overcome. Now, I wasn't shy about making those mistakes. I knew I could do the job, but those are going to be things that you struggle with. I had to arm myself. I have to get the knowledge that I need so I can do the job efficiently. Once you start doing that, then it just changes the narrative. That's where ASE comes in—they set the standard. If this is the standard of the industry, I'm going to achieve that standard. Each one of those certifications puts a notch in my belt, to where now you can't question it—it means I meet industry standards.

**Q: What do you hope your legacy is as an automotive educator?**

**Smith:** Man, that's a good question. I know God has a plan for all of us. The legacy that I hope I can leave behind is that perfect example, because when I went to college or tech school, I was the first one in my family. Since I've done it, I've had four cousins who have come after me who pursued the same thing.

I want to blaze a pathway to show my community how to get to a career that they can make a life with without all the extra struggles. With my students, I try to show them the result: This is where we're getting to, these are the steps that you can take to get there, and if you do this within five years, this is where you're going to be, and if I do this and work hard and I get the certifications, I know I can be making. 📌



## How ASE accreditation helped Timmy Martin build excellent automotive education programs

*Red Oak High School instructor discusses how accreditation transforms programs and student outcomes*

BY CHRIS JONES

**TIMMY MARTIN'S FORAY INTO** automotive began in his father's repair shop, where, as a child, he was the gofer: "Go for this wrench, go for that ratchet." His formal career started at 15 in the quick lube industry with Jiffy Lube, followed by three years of active duty in the Army in the early 2000s as an artillery mechanic.

After his stint in the military, Martin completed Ford's ASSET program at Brookhaven College in Dallas, Texas, specializing as a diesel technician working on F250 through F650

vehicles. Martin found his passion for teaching while mentoring younger classmates during his college program.

In January 2012, he left the shop and entered the classroom at Red Oak High School, just south of Dallas, where he now teaches automotive technology on high school and collegiate levels. Since then, Martin has grown his program from modest beginnings to 89 students, with plans to exceed 100 students and hire a second instructor.

In this interview, Martin discusses

how instrumental ASE accreditation has been in building program credibility, securing manufacturer partnerships, and preparing students for successful careers in the automotive industry.

**Q: What's the value of making sure that your programs are accredited?**

**Timmy Martin:** If you're trying to build a great program, ASE accreditation gives you a route ... to achieve those standards that the industry is

looking for. Accreditation provides this process—almost step by step—to establish those relationships with the industry, to build your program with the tools and equipment you need, to provide you with the training you need to meet those demands that your students are going to have for you, and the industry is asking of them.

**Q: How do ASE-accredited programs benefit the student's career?**

**Martin:** When the student knows that they are part of an ASE-accredited program, it provides some validity to them. They're not just in something that's been cooked up by somebody in their community. This is something that has the backing of a nationwide program that has relationships with manufacturers, dealerships, and independent repair shops across the board.

The other thing is that a lot of manufacturers provide web-based training. They'll provide resources to our training programs if we are ASE accredited, and so we've established a relationship with Toyota, General Motors, and Ford Motor Company. All of those manufacturers provide vehicles and web-based training. Those certifications are things that our students can take to a position in a dealership; they can hit the ground running as an 18- or 19-year-old, with some of those manufacturer certifications already under their belt. That's a huge leg up for them.

**Q: What other opportunities does ASE provide to help you and your students succeed?**

**Martin:** We get access to the weekly webinars that come out, which is a resource that not all of my students participate in, but it's just one more tool in our toolbox. And then, I'm

here. I've been to the last four ASE instructor conferences, and this is just a wealth of information. I bring a small notebook with me, and almost every year, a huge chunk of that notebook gets filled up with information that I gain from fellow instructors, from the training sessions that I get here. And a lot of what our regional representative from ASE has done in just connecting me with those dealers, those employers that are out there looking for our ASE-trained students. So as far as training goes, what I'm able to receive myself makes the work that it took to get accredited worth it, flat out, no questions asked. And then what I'm able to take back to my students is also a benefit to them.

**Q: If I'm a high school or college program leader who wants to become ASE accredited, what do I need to do?**

**Martin:** Get on ASE's website and look up the accreditation process. It seems like a daunting task and taking it one step at a time is the way to go about it. Get in there and start looking at those standards and tackling them one at a time. Reach out to your regional representative; they will walk you through that process and connect you with resources one standard at a time. So, you essentially work your way through the standards.

If you don't have a process for documenting what your program is accomplishing in both academic terms, for what your students are doing, and then also the training that you are receiving as an instructor, that would be a great place to start. This way, you can show ASE that you're meeting the standards that the industry is asking for. So, once you've worked through all of those standards, you'll reach out to ASE, and you'll start the evaluation process.

**Q: How has being an accredited program benefited your student recruitment?**

**Martin:** You can't unwind the clock and see how many kids I would have recruited had I not been ASE accredited. I'll say this at the high school level, when I sit down with parents and welcome a new group of exiting eighth graders, entering ninth graders, and I give them a rundown of what our program is aiming to do and the fact that we are ASE accredited, you can see the mood in the room changes when I talk about some of the successes that we've had because of ASE accreditation—placement in dealerships, some of the pay rates that our students have achieved with their ASE entry-level certifications, the training that we can provide because of ASE accreditation. You can see the students and the parents sit up a little straighter and realize that we're not a hobby shop. This is not a place for us to kick back and have a good time. We are really preparing them for an in-demand industry that's going to pay them well for their hard work.

I'll say from a classroom management standpoint that it helps so much in students taking the program seriously. I don't have to worry about a lot of behavioral issues because we've established ourselves as a training program for professionals, and so we demand professional behavior from our students. The parents also don't give a lot of pushback when I say, "This is a safety issue." We wouldn't want somebody driving away in an unsafe vehicle. Or this is a professionalism issue. This is not something you would expect of a professional in the industry. So, we're not going to expect this from our students. ASE accreditation has set us up (to be) a bit higher echelon to get the students who are really pursuing automotive. ■



## James Whaley: Building up the next generation of automotive techs

*Although he's technically been a teacher for a year, James Whaley, automotive technology instructor at Mineral Area College, has been training the next wave of technicians for years*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**JAMES WHALEY, AUTOMOTIVE** technology instructor at Mineral Area College in Park Hills, Missouri, has only been an educator in the academic sense for a year. He's been teaching a lot longer than that, having spent more than 30 years working in the automotive industry, running his own shop, and training new and inexperienced technicians. He found the process of educating those technicians so rewarding that he started thinking about closing the shop and reopening it just to train technicians once he retired. He didn't get the chance to consider that plan for long thanks to an opening with a new automotive technology program, and he hasn't looked back since.

**Q: What got you started as an educator?**

**James Whaley:** I was already working on a five-year exit plan for my retire-

ment. I brought in a tech, trained him up, and planned to hand the business over to him. We were in the middle of that process when a job opened up with a brand-new program. So, this is not only my first year teaching, but also the first year of a program that didn't exist a year ago. Long story short, I applied, got hired, and hit the ground running. I've got to say, ASE has been a huge help.

Rob Ferguson is my rep, and Bob Farris has also been great. We're not accredited yet as we're in the process. During the self-evaluation, before even presenting to our advisory board, I realized there were several things I needed to do differently since it's just me running the program.

I found out I wasn't tracking certain things even though I was teaching the skills. I wasn't measuring them. Last year, the VP of ASE said, "You can't manage what you don't measure." That really stuck with me. That was one area

where I realized I could improve after digging into the standards from ASE.

**Q: What would you say is the most valuable thing you've gotten from attending industry events?**

**Whaley:** Steve Johnson did a session last year on marketing, and seeing presenters bring their own style like that has helped me a lot. I've taken bits and pieces from different presenters. I'm actually heading to his session again in a minute because he was incredible. He presented with so much passion, and that's what I want my students to see in me.

**Q: Can you think of a moment when it just clicked for a student that this was more than a class, it was a career?**

**Whaley:** In my first very green year as an educator, which honestly makes me feel like I've found my "why," we were doing electrical work. Throughout the year, students were learning, but during the electrical unit, I had them all in one classroom. Suddenly, it just clicked. It was like light switches going off across the room, almost all at once. It was so rewarding.

Teaching someone something they didn't know before—something that could change their life—is powerful. It might even change their family's trajectory. Maybe their family has only ever done labor work, and now they can use their hands and their knowledge.

**Q: What does it feel like to see someone you taught or mentored go out and start their own shop or career?**

**Whaley:** Back when I had my shop, honestly, it kind of hurt when someone I trained would move on. You'd bring in green techs, train them, and then they'd leave, sometimes to a competitor. It affected me financially. But now, it's different. I can give back without it costing me an arm and a leg. ■



## Dawson Snipes: Finding inspiration in education

*Colorado Springs instructor talks about his first few months teaching and what the ASE Instructor Conference has to offer*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**DAWSON SNIPES, AUTOMOTIVE** instructor at Doherty High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, was stacking ASE certifications and racking up experience across a number of shops and specialties until a text message randomly popped up on his phone: "Hey, want to try teaching high school kids?" He's now nine months into the role after being brought in about a month after the school year started. According to him, it's been a good change of pace from working in a bay, and it gives him a chance to prepare his students for today's industry. That being said, teaching is not without its unique challenges.

**Q: What has teaching been like for you so far?**

**Dawson Snipes:** So far, it's been hectic. The disconnect between automotive and the CTE (Career and Technical Education) department is huge. Coming from the industry, they assumed everything was laid out and ready for me to teach. But there weren't many resources provided, and that was a big challenge.

**Q: How has your relationship with ASE changed—going from being certified yourself to now teaching students to become certified and career-ready technicians?**

**Snipes:** At the beginning of my career, there was a lot of push to get my certifications just for the shop's benefit. If I spent my own money to educate myself, I wanted something in return. When I brought that up, my manager said, "OK \$1.50 more per hour for every cert you get." That motivated me to pursue certifications. He reimbursed me for all the fees for the tests I passed.

My perspective has changed. At first, I wanted the certifications to get a job. Then I realized I didn't need them for the job I had. Now, I want them for myself, period.

When I teach students, I heard something today that really stuck with me: "Reward them." Have a ceremony. Celebrate when they earn an ASE certification, because it's hard. It's difficult to pass your engine certification on the first try, or electrical, or engine performance. Especially when you've only had six to nine months of exposure.

They're just getting familiar with the terminology—A&B testing, diagnostics, and all that. So, I think celebrating their wins is going to be huge this year.

**Q: What else have you taken away from the conference?**

**Snipes:** Everyone is going through the same struggles. We're all fighting the cell phone battle, some promoting them, some trying to limit them. You have to be a little bit on both sides now. There's no way to be completely against anything. You have to stay open-minded. That's huge for the kids. We have more opportunity than ever to cater to each individual need.

Plus, the variety of people here, the variety of backgrounds—it's inspiring. And it's encouraging to know that you don't necessarily have to get your hands dirty anymore. You really don't. They're able to go through their careers better and faster than what I had to do. ■



## Honoring his word: A master technician's journey into teaching

*Henry Valenzuela brings decades of automotive expertise to McNeil High School after transitioning from the City of Austin fleet maintenance*

BY CHRIS JONES

### YEAR ONE IS IN THE BOOKS, FOLKS.

When you ask rookie automotive educator Henry Valenzuela what his first year teaching at McNeil High School in Austin, Texas, was like, he gets somber, and treats it as something sacred—a promise long made now fulfilled, “My instructors back in college had recommended that I needed to teach at least part-time when I graduated,” he said.

He’s harkening back to his St. Philip’s College days in 1993, when his instructor planted a seed, telling the young automotive technology graduate that it would be right for him to one day return to teach and serve the community that had taught him.

For thirty years, that advice re-

mained in the back of Valenzuela’s mind as he built an impressive automotive career. His path took him through GM dealerships—Chevrolet, Buick, and Cadillac—before expanding into heavy equipment and over-the-road trucks. After a stint with an ambulance company, he spent eleven years with the City of Austin, working on everything from police cars to dump trucks. His last four years were at Austin Bergstrom International Airport, maintaining ground power units and the entire fleet of airport vehicles.

Valenzuela has maintained his ASE Master Certified status throughout most of his career, a testament to his expertise. Today, he’s an automotive educator applying for a dual-credit

adjunct position with a community college to go ahead of and expand opportunities for his high school students.

After three decades, Valenzuela has answered his instructor’s call to give back—he’s bringing real-world experience and master-level expertise to young technicians hoping to walk a mile in his steel-toe shop boots.

**Q: What was the transition from shop to classroom like for you this first year? How did you get your opportunity?**

**Valenzuela:** Because I did get an associate’s degree from St. Philips College way back in the day, I applied to my school district, and they started me on

an emergency certificate because it’s a high-need area, and now I’m working on my teaching certificate.

I learned this year that it’s very tough for somebody if you don’t have a support system. I have a veteran teacher who has been helping me. It’s extremely easy when you have to work with a person who’s willing to open his book to show you everything that he’s doing. He’s making me a better person. He’s doing this for the same reason that I want to do it—for the students. It’s been a great year. What’s tough is the challenges of the attitudes and the personalities. They respect you when you find that balance between demanding respect and giving them respect at the same time. It does help.

**Q: As a teacher, what do you feel that you were equipped to do well, and what do you feel like you had to learn on the way?**

Valenzuela: So, part of the things the first year the students told me was that it was fun to be in my class. Nobody wants to just talk about how the car rolls. There’s no excitement or joking or nothing challenging. It’s just kind of a stick in the mud. We want to spice it up a little bit, make things interesting.

What I wasn’t prepared for was 40 different icons on my computer to get to 30 different screens to do 12 different things. That and the school district has budgetary constraints. So, they change things from one program to another from one year to the next. And you have all these different things you’ve got to report to, sometimes two to three times on those different apps. There’s been a lot of positives that I learned, but having a good support system from the veteran teacher was the most important for me.

**Q: How are you getting in there with the students to equip them and prepare them for their future?**

**Valenzuela:** I’m teaching with another first-year teacher next door. We teach the same class, and we might be working on steering at the same time. He’s going to work on one aspect of the steering, and I’m going to work on another. We might trade off and do suspension and steering. We work well together. We have a great facility so that we can do that. And we have vehicles that have been donated by the community college and by manufacturers. Just working well together and not overshadowing each other with who’s first or who’s not but making sure that we take care of cross-training if we have to. Sometimes a veteran teacher will come in and help us, too. So, it’s been very good and very interesting.

**Q: How are you working with kids and their parents and helping their parents understand the value of being in automotive?**

**Valenzuela:** It can be challenging for certain students. We have students on a wide spectrum with their financial means. And sometimes it’s difficult to get a hold of a parent because they’re working two jobs or more. Sometimes it’s difficult to get hold of the ones who are well off because they’re busy or one parent is the only one that talks to you, and basically you do the best that you can.

The main form of communication is by email and sometimes by phone, but it’s basically reassuring them that my main concern is to let them know that I have all 10 of my fingers and all 10 of my toes and I’m going to do the same for their kids and I’m going to teach them something that even if they do not decide to go into this field, they’re going to learn how to change a tire. They’re going to learn something about safety and learn one thing such as changing a battery or jumpstarting a vehicle safely for in the future.

**Q: What’s been rewarding for you as a first-year instructor?**

**Valenzuela:** Some of the feedback from the students. At the end of the year, they say, “I appreciate everything you taught us” and “You made the class interesting.” And that’s some of the feedback that I get from some of those students with disciplinary issues. They need that tenderness, sometimes, to understand that I’m here for their learning and I’m going to do what I need to. So that’s some of the most rewarding things.

The other thing that was most rewarding was our SkillsUSA competition that the veteran instructor had already had in place. I traveled with them to see how it’s changed since I was in high school. I think we took 12 students to the state competition in Corpus (Christi) this year for SkillsUSA, and they came back with 17 medals for taking a technical test. So, it’s very proud to see that we were a part of that. We try to help each other out whenever we can. Like I said, we enjoy seeing them succeed, and then it builds confidence in them.

**Q: Has a relationship with ASE been beneficial to your program?**

**Valenzuela:** Definitely. One of the things that we teach is that our program is certified, our facility is certified, and our school is certified through ASE.

**Q: Do you see yourself embracing teaching long-term?**

Valenzuela: I believe so. I mean, it’s taken me a long time to get here, and I really have enjoyed it. I think the more that I do it, it’s going to be a little bit more of a comfort. I mean, I feel comfortable doing it now, so I hope that it can get smoother. There’s always going to be a change. And we want to make sure we get this end result: a student who is valuable to the community and to our workforce. ■



## How generative AI can be used for good in the classroom

*Like any tool, using AI incorrectly can cause issues, but with mindful use, it can radically reduce a teacher's workload*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**DR. ALEX RICHARDS**, content developer and quality assistance manager with Electude, presented “Leveraging AI in the Classroom,” explaining the basics of artificial intelligence tools, how they function, their weak points, and how they can be used in the classroom to reduce teacher workload and increase the amount of time educators can spend developing quality content and focusing on individual students.

Many of the educators in the room described themselves as somewhat fa-

miliar with AI, having dabbled with the technology a couple of times. Richards emphasized that AI should be used as a tool, and, in a lesson that equally applies to the technicians in the shop bays as it does to the educators working to prepare the next generation, a tool is only as useful as the person using it.

Richards also took the session attendees through the process of creating their own specific GPTs and training them to fulfill their specific

needs by entering and correcting prompts for the GPT. As a tool, it can then be used to generate outlines quickly, provide basic starting points to help educators maintain focus, write test questions, handle lesson plans, perform basic translations for students not fluent in English, and more. The more it's used, the better it will be at formatting, language choice, and adjusting the reading level to meet a student's needs.

Students can engage with the GPT, with the GPT roleplaying as an advisory board interviewer, service advisor, or upset customer to help them develop their customer service and soft skills. It can also serve as a starting point for critical thinking exercises or act as an always-available tutor.

Attendees were warned about some of the pitfalls of artificial intelligence. Technical data, like recommendations for how much torque to apply to a specific bolt, need careful evaluation and are frequently inaccurate. Vague or generic requests create fewer effective responses, so specificity is a key part of successfully using AI. As Richards emphasized, it isn't a solution, and it isn't flawless, but when used with the right mindset and right precautions, it can revolutionize the educator's workload.

*Takeaways from automotive educators:*

### How AI is being used in the classroom now

Educators are using AI to create and improve presentations, as well as generate customized printouts, checklists, and labs specific to the resources they have on hand. It's also used to tailor content to students' specific needs, such as reading or math deficiencies.

Some teachers recommended recording their advisory board meetings and then uploading that recording to an AI service to quickly create notes and plans from that meeting. ▀



## How Reed Mundy decided to become the solution for struggling techs

*Baton Rouge Community College instructor explains why he'll spend the rest of his career teaching and how he equips his students for the future*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**REED MUNDY SPENT OVER TWO** decades in the heavy equipment and heavy truck repair industries, experiencing the technician shortage firsthand. Shuffling through underprepared and undereducated technicians got old, quick, as did the stresses that came with being a fleet manager. In his own words, “I got very tired of not being able to find quality technicians, so I decided to become the solution.” Mundy has now been an educator for six-and-a-half years, currently serving as Lead Diesel Instructor at Baton Rouge Community College. He already knows that he'll spend the rest of his career educating and training the next generation.

**Q: How has the field changed with technology evolving so quickly? How do you prepare students for a field in flux?**

**Reed Mundy:** First and foremost, I educate myself. ASE program accreditation requires 20 hours of annual training, and that's the minimum. Personally, I do at least 40 hours a year, often closer to 80 or more. I go through module updates from multiple OEMs, so I know what's coming. I'm not in the shop every day, so I also visit industry partners and learn in person. It's how I stay relevant. There's no point in teaching outdated technology that hasn't been produced in 10 years and is barely on the road anymore.

**Q: Have you had any students you're particularly proud of?**

**Mundy:** I could go on and on. I have students who are top performers across entire dealership groups in terms of efficiency. I've had students win at the state level in SkillsUSA competitions

and place in the top ten nationally. A couple of young women in particular—one is now one of the best diagnostic technicians at United Rentals in all of Louisiana. I could brag about my students all day.

**Q: What role does ASE play for you as an educator?**

**Mundy:** I think it's essential. I wish the heavy truck industry valued it more. Some companies really do—FedEx, for example, gives a \$7 per hour raise to master truck technicians. Others recognize it but don't value it as much. The companies that do value it tend to understand that ASE plays a major role in education as an accreditation body.

**Q: Do you try to teach your students that they're earning certifications for themselves—not just checking a box?**

**Mundy:** Absolutely. We have a lot of certifications built into both our automotive and diesel/heavy truck programs. We let students know that some of these are essential for improving their education, starting with basic safety, and building from there. This industry is constantly changing. Every six months, there's something new in every part of it. Continuing education and earning certifications show that you've been trained to work on the latest technology.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the ASE Instructor Conference?**

**Mundy:** I attend four or five conferences each year, and this one is hands down my favorite. I talk to the same instructors year after year. I especially enjoy meeting first-year instructors who are trying to navigate everything. They're excited and eager to learn, and it's great to see.

I have a huge amount of respect for ASE and what they're doing, especially considering the limited budget they give themselves, so I just want to say thank you for supporting us. ▀



## Changing the paradigm in schools and shops

*The automotive industry is grappling with significant issues, and schools can help it take the first step toward a better future*

BY GRIFFIN MATIS

**TEACHERS WORK TO PREPARE** their students with the metaphorical tools that they need to find success in their lives and careers, but there's an opportunity to use physical tools to do just that. Sonic USA Education Sales Manager Bailey Pearson and Director of Sales Colin Speer presented "From classroom to career: Equipping the next generation of technicians," where they covered some of the options available to educators to better equip their students with both the soft skills necessary to succeed in a professional environment and the hard skills required to actually do the work of a technician.

The industry has some major paradigm shifts to make on the employer side, with shops needing to invest more into their technicians, their working environment, and their tools

to address the needs of current and future technicians. That's a tall task, but at the very least, automotive educators can help start the shift.

By partnering with local dealerships, schools have expanded the opportunities and tools available to their students. Sonic Tools has seen the gap between schools and shops and is now working to establish a new kind of relationship between the two.

"My goal is to teach you how to mend the bridge between schools and dealerships," Pearson said.

Asking local partners to serve on advisory boards, donate used equipment and components, provide feedback on tool lists, or allow students to visit and job shadow can further grow the relationship.

These partnerships are a form of

early investment on the part of the shops battling the ongoing technician shortage. Working with dealerships to better equip the schools and educational facilities with professional grade tools and equipment is going to be one of the key parts of improving the industry long-term. Starting the investment at the schools and proving to shops that investing is critical to filling those empty bays is just the first step, but it makes a huge difference to the students right away.

"Starting out with something that is a professional standard in a dealership, or an independent shop is a good way to start getting students more involved, but also to say, 'This is what is going to be expected of you when you do get there,'" Pearson explained.

"Make it look professional. Getting people excited about coming to the classroom, especially getting students excited about not only coming to the classroom and wanting to learn, but also wanting to use the equipment that you have available."

*Key insights from automotive educators:*

### The technician shortage

The industry is facing some of the same challenges it faced 20 years ago—a shortage of technicians that need to be grown because they can't be found.

### What's missing

Hiring quality people requires quality pay, which isn't happening. No leadership, no mentorship happening at a lot of shops today.

### Struggles with the system

Administration frequently misunderstands the scope and scale of auto tech work. Budgets get depleted from replacing missing tools and equipment. ■



## Ryan Arnold: 'I want to be that bridge' between the classroom and the shop

*The Texas-based teacher reflects on 15 years of experience, the changing shop landscape, and the role of technology in shaping tomorrow's technicians*

BY CHRIS JONES

**RYAN ARNOLD HAS SPENT** more than 15 years in the classroom and over two decades in automotive, and it shows. He's taught at both the community college and high school levels, often through dual credit programs, and adds a plethora of real-world auto shop experience to every lesson.

Before teaching, Arnold worked just about every kind of job you can think of—fixing equipment on his family's farm, wrenching in independent shops and big-name dealerships, even installing stereos at a Circuit City-style shop while going to school. He's also a military vet and still stays active in the racing scene.

All said and done, Arnold just

wants to give his students the tools and confidence to build real automotive careers they take pride in. Whether they're picking up a wrench for the first time or diving into diagnostics, he's right there with them—teaching, encouraging, and making sure they're ready for whatever's next—including the latest automotive technologies.

**Q: What are some of the technological changes that you've seen as an instructor, even over the last five to 10 years?**

**Arnold:** I mean, I'm trying to think of something that recently, but there's been just a huge shift away from

automotive as a place to put kids who don't do well in school. Realistically, automotive probably needs to be moved out of the transportation, distribution, and logistics section into more of a STEM-type program. That's what I see, especially with all of the autonomous driving, that it's now almost an engineering-level job versus a wrench-turning job.

**Q: Are students entering the program more excited about working on cars that are more technologically advanced than those that are not?**

**Arnold:** I want to say that the students you would have that are excited are probably on the same level. I would imagine that there are slightly different versions of it. But when you do get their excitement, you build off it.

**Q: Are many of them intrigued by the emerging tech side of it—ADAS and EVs?**

**Arnold:** Because I do still do some stuff with the college, at the college level, they are. They're involved on their personal device and not really paying that much attention when in their parents' vehicle and stuff. But at the college level, absolutely.

**Q: How do you build the curriculum to help them understand and adapt to changing technology?**

**Arnold:** So, it's a constantly changing thing, and what's so great about the new AI coming out is that you can almost custom tailor a curriculum to benefit each kid individually. We've actually switched our textbook platform to a system that is almost like an adaptive learning platform where it will focus on the areas that the student is struggling with most and kind of skip over the areas that they're excelling in. So that's been really helpful. ■

2025

# 2025 ASE INSTRUCTOR TRAINING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

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