

ECONOMY

How to build a robust labor pipeline? Hyundai partners with K-12 schools, colleges and state

K-12 districts, four-year universities, technical colleges and Quick Start prepare to supply Hyundai and suppliers with talent.



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Hyundai's 8,100-employee automobile assembly plant and EV battery factory opens soon, and the Savannah region's training centers and school systems are creating workforce pipelines for the South Korean automaker and its suppliers.

Talent needs to be flowing through the labor conduits early, say Hyundai officials and school administrators. Here's a look at some of the long-term strategies the area's education centers have in place or are implementing. The programs emphasize a range of skills from technical certificates to higher-level engineering and computer science knowledge, all of which aim to boost the local workforce pool.

K-12 schools

School administrators from Chatham, Effingham, Bulloch and Bryan counties – jurisdictions part of the Savannah Joint Development Authority that brokered the Hyundai deal – all point to their schools' existing career pathway programs.

CTAE or Career Technical, Agricultural Education are pathways designed to prepare students for the workforce through targeted classes, certificates or articulated college credit. Each county's school district provides different pathway offerings across their K-12s.

In the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, students can choose from 17 different subjects or clusters, including those in collision repair, computer science, engineering and technology and manufacturing, all areas geared toward the EV

manufacturing industry, said Angie Lewis, executive director of the district's Office of College and Career Readiness.

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“A lot of the cars they will be building are computerized so computer science is huge,” said Lewis, who noted that computer science programs are offered at each high school. “It depends on what the student wants to focus on, it can be general computer science, or cybersecurity or computer networking as well as gaming. But that particular pathway will prepare students to work for the Hyundai plant.”

Chatham County public school students also have the option to apply for a choice school, allowing students who live outside of a school's attendance zone to attend their choice program. Savannah elementary, middle and high schools all have programs centered around STEM education.

Jenkins High School, for example, offers an engineering program geared towards producing graduates who want to pursue a degree or certificate in the field by offering dual college credit and real world experience.

“We have a strong partnership with the technical colleges and dual enrollment offerings at Armstrong and Georgia Southern University,” said Lewis. “It just depends on the interest of the student and what they want to do.” Lewis said administrators are planning to meet with Hyundai and workforce development officials to create more specific pathways that would serve the Hyundai plant.

According to Georgia Speaker of the House Jon Burns, the General Assembly has a study committee that is actively looking into aligning workforce needs with school curriculums. That could mean a new pathway specifically geared toward EVs, according to some school officials.

Todd Wall, director of CTAE at the Effingham County School District and CEO of the Effingham College and Career Academy, said discussions on creating a dual enrollment program between high schools and Savannah Tech's Electric Vehicle Professional certificate are already taking place.

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“We’ve been talking with the frontline folks at these companies and asking, ‘Hey, what are you looking for in employment? We want to start prepping our students and tailor our curriculum to fit your needs,’” said Wall.

Wall said the potential partnership, which schools are hoping to roll out this fall, will allow high school seniors to graduate with the certificate in hand. Savannah Tech serves Chatham, Effingham, Bryan and Liberty schools. Bulloch County’s regional technical college is Ogeechee Tech. Hyundai plans to expand EV certificate programs to technical colleges across south Georgia.

Wall points out that Effingham County’s College and Career Academy, a public high school, is specifically prepared to serve the needs of Hyundai. The school, which opened in 2010, offers programs in logistics, engineering, automotive and computer science among other subjects.

“The jobs in the state of Georgia are booming so we want to make sure we’re preparing students for whatever career pathways they choose,” said Wall.

In addition to CTAE career pathways, the Bulloch County School District has a Career-Workforce Steering Committee that is working to accomplish a three-year career workforce development plan. The aim is to increase employability, enlistment or enrollment by bolstering CTAE pathways, dual enrollment opportunities and work-based learning, according to the plan’s website.

“Leadership in Bulloch County has been working collaboratively over the past 10 years to develop a plan for workforce development that has positioned us very well to meet the needs of industry expansion in the region. These efforts will lead to improved quality of life and opportunities for our community,” wrote Charles Wilson, Bulloch County Schools’ superintendent.

Wilson said that the steering committee is hoping to engage with Hyundai and other industry representatives as the plant ramps up towards opening.

Technical colleges and universities

Hyundai representatives are focused on creating strategies to grow long-term talent in both technical skills and the high-level engineering and computing fields.

So far, Savannah Tech has announced the Electric Vehicle Professional certificate program ,and a training partnership with a Hyundai supplier, Sewon America, as well as a certificate ;

for EV repair technicians.

More partnerships with area technical colleges are in the works, according to Brent Stubbs, senior manager of learning and development for the Hyundai Metaplant.

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According to Stubbs, Hyundai's most immediate priority is to fill the gaps in the local high-level engineering pool. The automaker is in discussions with Savannah State, Georgia Tech and Georgia Southern about adding an EV component to their curriculum.

“This is a first-in-the-world smart factory with automation,” said Stubbs, “So that’s going to require computer scientists, software engineers, so we’re looking at building relationships for that talent.”

Georgia Southern University currently offers six different types of undergraduate engineering degrees and six graduate-level engineering degrees. This fall, the Statesboro-based school will add two engineering doctorates, a Ph.D. in applied computing degree and a Ph.D. in engineering with concentrations in civil, electrical, advanced manufacturing and mechanical engineering.

Mohammad Davoud, dean of GSU's Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Computing, said the university has been planning these programs for about 10 years in anticipation of Georgia's growth.

“STEM programs such as engineering and applied computing are extremely attractive to these industries,” said Davoud. “The programs directly provide an employee pool of highly trained engineers, computing professionals and problem solvers ... resulting in a trained state and regional workforce with B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees.”

Davoud points out that adding advanced degrees will result in high-quality post-secondary educators to support the next generation, bolstering the entire ecosystem of engineers and computer scientists.

Stubbs describes a symbiotic relationship between the metaplant and the area's universities. “Before, we’ve had a lot of young talent leave this community, go to college, go to UGA or Georgia Tech, and then move away. But now, people can go home to a great job and company that shares their values,” said Stubbs.

Quick Start Training Center

The final piece of the workforce training puzzle is Quick Start, a division of the Technical College System of Georgia that provides customized workforce training for companies. To support the Hyundai workforce, the Technical College System is building a \$62.5 million Quick Start Training Center on the metaplant site, which will prepare Hyundai employees as well as those of relevant suppliers.

Additionally, the Georgia Department of Economic Development will request more than \$10 million in funds from the Georgia Legislature to expand the existing Quick Start Advanced Manufacturing Center in Pooler.

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Stubbs describes Quick Start as having two major goals. Training new employees, or what Hyundai calls “metapros” so that they’re “ready to hit the plant on Day One,” and building relationships with the community by providing training for the incoming technical college programs and building interest in EV manufacturing.

“What they experience in that training center is going to be a scaled-down version of everything that they’re going to experience in the plant from welding, stamp, paint, and general assembly, as well as quality. So, there’s going to be things in there that are proprietary to us,” said Stubbs.

Quick Start is working with Hyundai’s subject matter experts right now to customize that curriculum, he adds.

“It’s not teaching them how to build the car – because we’re going to do that once we hire them – as much as teaching them about automotive electric vehicles and safety,” said Stubbs. “We’re trying to create a new talent pipeline that’s excited about electric cars.”

Hyundai plans to hire 500 employees this year and another 700 by the end of 2024, with the majority of those coming from the local labor pool. The pipelines being created today will be feed a gradual workforce buildup, with Hyundai projecting the full workforce - 8,100 - to be on the job by 2031.

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About this series

To better understand the challenges ahead, Savannah Morning News journalists Nancy Guan and Latrice Williams examined the local workforce landscape from two perspectives: Labor pools and training programs. The research offers glimpses into how Savannah's economy is already evolving, where officials expect newcomers to move to Savannah from, and the scale of the workforce development programs being put in place. The five-part series explores:

Training programs

Developing soft skills

Expanding Savannah's high-tech knowledge base

Recruiting workers from inside the Savannah market

Recruiting workers from beyond the Savannah market