



Press Release

Eight New York High School Skilled Trades Teachers, Programs Among 50 Finalists for 2020 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence

\$1 Million in Cash Prizes to be Awarded in October

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CALABASAS, Calif.—Eight high school skilled trades teachers and programs from New York State are among 50 teachers and teacher teams from across the country who were named today as finalists for the 2020 Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence. The teachers and their trades programs are in the running for a share of \$1 million in total cash awards.

Chosen by an independent panel of judges from a field of more than 600 skilled trades teachers who applied for the prize, the finalists are:

- **Alfia Anderson**, who teaches electrical at the High School for Energy and Technology in the Bronx,
- **Thomas Aubin**, who teaches welding at Clinton-Essex-Warren-Washington Board of Cooperative Educational Services (CEWW BOCES) in Plattsburgh
- **Crystal Aukema**, who teaches agriculture at Marathon Central School in Marathon,
- **James “Jim” Buck**, who teaches electrical at Wayne Technical and Career Center in Williamson,
- **David Krawczyk** and **Robert Mroz**, who teach automotive at Potter Career and Technical Center in West Seneca,
- **Andrew Saweikis**, who teaches welding at Rockland Board of Cooperative Educational Services Career and Technical Education Center (BOCES CTEC) in West Nyack,
- **Leif Sorgule**, who teaches technology and engineering at Peru High School in Peru and

- **Robert Verone**, who teaches technical theater and set design at Lawrence High School in Cedarhurst.

The 50 finalists—some competing as individuals and some as teacher teams—hail from 23 states and specialize in trades including manufacturing, welding, construction, automotive, agriculture mechanics and technical theater. New York is tied with California for the most prize finalists of any state.

“Trades teachers are truly unsung heroes, and our prize seeks to show everyone how powerful these classes can be,” said Danny Corwin, executive director of Harbor Freight Tools for Schools. “Skilled trades education has enormous potential to offer students pathways to multiple postsecondary opportunities, and these are the teachers who are providing them with the knowledge, skills and inspiration year after year.”

The full list of finalists is available [here](#) and short biographies of the New York finalists are below.

The 2020 finalists now advance to a second round of competition, where they will be asked to respond to online expert-led video learning modules designed to solicit their insights and creative ideas about teaching practices. The contenders will be asked how ideas from the modules might be used to inspire students to achieve excellence in the skilled trades. Two rounds of judging, each by separate independent panels of reviewers, will narrow the field to 18 winners and, finally, name three of those teachers Grand Prize recipients. All winners will be announced in late October.

The 18 winners will split \$1 million in prizes. Grand Prize winners will each receive \$100,000, with \$70,000 going to their public high school skilled trades program and \$30,000 to the individual skilled trades teacher or teacher team behind the winning program. The 15 additional winners will each be awarded \$50,000, with \$35,000 going to their public high school program and \$15,000 to the teacher or team. Finalists whose school, district and/or state policy prohibits receipt of the individual portion of prize earnings were eligible to apply on behalf of their school’s skilled trades program. If they win, their entire share of the prize will be awarded to the school.

The Harbor Freight Tools for Schools Prize for Teaching Excellence was started in 2017 by Eric Smidt, the founder of national tool retailer Harbor Freight Tools. The prize recognizes outstanding instruction in the skilled trades in U.S. public high schools and the teachers who inspire students to learn a trade that prepares them for life after graduation. As recent [research](#) from JFF (formerly known as Jobs for the Future) and funded by Harbor Freight Tools for Schools found, students who “concentrate” (or take

multiple trades courses as part of a program) are more likely to graduate than their peers. Upon graduation, students are prepared for either further education or work in fields that routinely rank among the hardest jobs to fill.

Now, in the fourth year of the prize, more than 200 teachers have been recognized as winners or finalists. Winners join a nationwide network of outstanding trades teachers who convene regularly by webinar and in a three-day summer workshop to share best practices and advance their field.

“There’s a reason why polls show enormous support for trades education—with more than 8 in 10 parents and voters believing it deserves more funding,” Smidt said, citing a [poll](#) conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago and released this spring by Harbor Freight Tools for Schools. “Trades teachers are building up the tradespeople of the future—the workers who will keep our critical care infrastructure, our communication networks, our homes and cars, up and running. They deserve to be celebrated.”

New York State Finalists

Alfia Anderson teaches low voltage theory and installation at the High School for Energy and Technology (HSET) in the Bronx. After a 14-year career as an electrician specializing in roadways, bridges and tunnels and an active member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 3, Anderson decided to use her skills to educate a new generation of electricians. Her students begin with low voltage theory, then learn residential, commercial and industrial wiring. They must also complete at least 50 internship hours in the field and learn onsite with local utilities, transit agencies, military divisions, and others. This past semester, a quarter of HSET’s students were enrolled in some type of work-based learning, from job shadowing to being an electrician’s helper. Anderson is HSET’s lead advisor for SkillsUSA, a national nonprofit association of trades students, and their chapter has partnered with the school’s National Honor Society chapter to create leadership and community service opportunities for students, such as peer-to-peer tutoring.

Thomas Aubin has taught welding at CEWW BOCES for more than 20 years. A graduate of a New York welding program himself, Aubin served in the Navy Reserve as a hull maintenance technician and as a battle tank welder for General Dynamics, providing him a strong foundation to apply to the classroom. Deeply credentialed as an educator, he is an American Welding Society certified welding inspector and instructor, and has accumulated 136 college credits and numerous certifications to bring ever-evolving expertise to his students. Despite his school’s rural location, Aubin connects students to real-world opportunities by collaborating with businesses in Montreal and

local manufacturers like Volvo, Bombardier, Nova Bus and Jeffords Steel. Upon graduation, 85 to 94 percent of Aubin's students pursue further education, enroll in the armed forces or begin a career in the trades. Aubin has been a finalist for the past three years of the Prize for Teaching Excellence.

Crystal Aukema teaches agriculture at Marathon High School in Marathon. A 12-year teaching veteran, Aukema draws on her deep relationships in her school's rural community to connect students to opportunities to learn and work in the region's vital agriculture field. Aukema's students learn agriscience, as well as carpentry and other agricultural mechanics, and she has recently added work on a computer numerical control (CNC) router to the curriculum. She started an Agriculture Fair at her school, where students showcase their work to the community and connect to local industry representatives. Aukema runs the school's FFA (formerly known as Future Farmers of America) chapter and works closely with the Marathon FFA alumni group to secure work-based learning, apprenticeship and job opportunities for her students.

James "Jim" Buck teaches electrical at Wayne Technical and Career Center in Williamson. After a career as a nationally certified chief electrical inspector, Buck came as a guest speaker to his nephew's high school electrical class and caught the teaching bug. In nearly his 20th year of teaching, Buck offers a robust program in not just electrical theory, safety and wiring, but also training in Category 5 cable—a type of cable used to connect computer networks—fiber optics, first aid, and fork lift use among other skills. Buck also teaches renewable energy technologies, and his school's solar and wind systems were both installed by his students. Each year, his students collaborate with the school's carpentry classes to build a house for the local community.

David Krawczyk and **Robert Mroz** teach automotive technology and collision repair at Potter Career and Technical Center in West Seneca. Their program curriculum tracks the highest-quality professional standards and aligns with the local community college, and students begin earning college credit as early as tenth grade. Mroz, a 25-year teaching veteran, is an Inter-Industry Conference on Auto Collision Repair (I-CAR) certified instructor and adjunct professor at two local community colleges, where he also trains new teachers. Mroz and Krawczyk partner with local dealerships and collision repair professionals to connect students to internships and post-graduation jobs. Working in small teams in the classroom, their students rotate through every aspect of auto technology and collision repair, from tire patching to metal inert gas (MIG) welding. Mroz and Krawczyk's students not only earn national automotive certifications in I-CAR, but they also develop maturity and professional skills, from ethics and communications to resume-building and workplace attire.

Andrew Saweikis teaches welding at Rockland BOCES CTEC in West Nyack. After developing a love of welding in high school, Saweikis went on to earn a degree from Cornell University in Applied Economics and Management. That passion for welding called him back to the trade, and he embarked on a career as a certified union welder. In the workforce, Saweikis “found the most joy” in training others in welding and fabrication skills, and he transitioned to teaching by starting the welding program at Rockland, where he has taught for five years. Saweikis’s curriculum is aligned with the American Welding Society’s certifications, and each year, his students progress from safety protocols all the way through advanced tungsten inert gas (TIG) welding. This year, Saweikis’s students won both a local welding trade show and the national “Rulers of the Flame” competition, receiving \$8,000 in equipment for their shop. Many of Saweikis’s students pursue welding after graduation, with an average of 20 percent continuing their welding education and 30 percent going directly into the welding or construction industry.

Leif Sorgule teaches technology, engineering, construction and manufacturing at Peru High School in Peru. Before becoming a teacher 11 years ago, Sorgule earned a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in technology education and worked previously as a marine mechanic and carpenter. He is also an adjunct professor at Clinton Community College. At Peru High, Sorgule boosts workplace readiness and skills by modeling his classrooms on working businesses: construction students bid on mini residential construction jobs, robotics classes build scale robotic arms for factory use and engineering students design, build and test scissor lifts. His courses integrate cutting-edge technology with hands-on use of tools, from coding CNC machines to metal fabrication, computer-aided design to woodworking.

Robert Verone teaches set design construction and stage crew at Lawrence High School in Cedarhurst. Over the past 25 years, Verone has melded his training as a visual artist with a life-long love of creating and building to teach his students to design, build and bring to life performances, school events and construction projects. Drawing on deep regional relationships, Verone has established partnerships with local universities, community organizations and the local stagehand union in Manhattan—his students have even worked on a Broadway production while in high school. Verone emphasizes collaboration in all aspects of his stage crew courses, with small groups of students leading the design, construction, painting, lighting, sound and technology of every production.

About Harbor Freight Tools for Schools

Harbor Freight Tools for Schools is a program of The Smidt Foundation, established by Harbor Freight Tools Founder Eric Smidt, to advance excellent skilled trades education

in public high schools across America. With a deep respect for the dignity of these fields and for the intelligence and creativity of people who work with their hands, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools aims to drive a greater understanding of and investment in skilled trades education, believing that access to quality skilled trades education gives high school students pathways to graduation, opportunity, good jobs and a workforce our country needs. Harbor Freight Tools is a major supporter of the Harbor Freight Tools for Schools program. For more information, visit us at HarborFreightToolsforSchools.org and [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

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