

Teens find summer jobs filled by adults

Slack Unifour economy shown by lack of Hickory High notices

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HICKORY - To see the shabby state of the Unifour's economy, just look at the bulletin board outside the counseling office at Hickory High School.

In better years, the job postings section would be covered with notices for summer opportunities for high school students. Last week, there was one.

"There was a time when I was getting over five a week," said Bettie Kirkman, the school's career development coordinator. "I have had maybe five for the whole semester."

As the economy limps along, the annual search for summer work is dealing many students a harsh lesson.

Amid widespread unemployment, many jobs typically filled by teenagers have gone to laid-off adults. Retirees looking to supplement shrinking pensions are working part-time. Legal restrictions on the hours that under-18 employees can work, and the kind of work they can do, mean some employers will turn to older workers.

"(Teenagers) are definitely at the bottom rung," said Renee Ward, founder and executive director of Teens4hire.org, a national Internet job service.

A recent Teens4hire.org survey found that more than 775 employers that usually hire teenagers -- including restaurants, retailers and summer camps -- are cutting back, with some not even considering teen applicants.

About 70 percent of people ages 16 to 24 were in the labor force last July, the lowest rate for that month since 1971, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A Junior Achievement poll of about 1,100 students found that 81 percent planned to work this summer, down from 85 percent in 2002 and 86 percent in 2001.

Youth in the Unifour, which has lost more than 8,800 jobs in the past two years and where unemployment hangs just under 8 percent, face the same struggle.

"Obviously, given (the widespread joblessness), we have seen far fewer summer openings for students," said Allan Mackie, manager of the N.C. Employment Security Commission's Catawba County office. "And when they come in, they disappear very quickly."

Hickory High School student Tripp Davis sees that firsthand.

Davis, who is looking to earn spending money for college, hasn't had much luck with grocery stores and restaurants. Now that he's 18, he's eligible to work for his dad's company. Trouble is, his dad's business is furniture -- one of the hardest-hit sectors of the Catawba Valley economy.

"There's not much going on," he said.

Crystal White, 17, doesn't see much going on, either.

Crystal had no trouble getting a job last summer at McDonald's. She has an opportunity to go back there this year. But so far, the Hickory High junior's quest for a job with more consistent hours been a dead end.

"Last summer, it was easy to get a job at the mall or wherever," she said. "Now, they're saying they're not hiring, or they're just taking applications."

College student Robert Bekemeier knew the search would be a struggle. "My dad told me going in that with all the layoffs," summer jobs would be scarce, he said.

So far, the Catawba Valley Community College criminal justice major has filled out 30 to 35 applications: he's tried the mall, restaurants, every store in the Hickory Ridge Shopping Center, he said. On Thursday, he applied at a Hickory pizza place that hasn't even opened yet.

He's determined: Instead of waiting for phone calls, he's gone back to check on the applications. And buoyed by seeing his girlfriend land a job last week at Blockbuster, he's hopeful.

"I just have to be there at the right time," he said. "I figure eventually, someone will start hiring."

Some already are.

Kirkman, the Hickory High career development coordinator, is still signing the work permits required for minors to hold a job.

So far this May, she has signed one, compared to the 16 she signed in May last year.

And something else has changed, too, she said.

During flush times, many students wanted summer work to fill gas tanks or put spending money in their pockets. Now, with so many parents out of jobs, some young people need to help their families put food on the table.

"We have students who are supporting families because of the loss of jobs," she said. "This is what really breaks your heart."

Want to Know More?

With teenagers facing a tight summer job market, Teens4hire.org offers tips to young people who are looking for work. For more information and tips -- such as advice on how to fill out job applications -- see the Web site. The organization suggests that job-seeking teens:

- Get the best grades possible in school and take part in school-sponsored activities like clubs and sports.
- Participate in community activities. Employers see this as a sign of your ability to serve others, and it gives them insight about how you will serve customers.
- Be aggressive. Ask around, surf the Web and go out and look for a job. Employers are expecting teens to seek them out.
- Ask everybody you know -- teachers, counselors, your parents, your friends, your parents' friends -- about places that are hiring teens.
- Look for "now hiring" signs at places where you'd like to work and ask to speak with the hiring manager.
- Learn how to complete an application. Employers consider neatness and accuracy; misspelled words and sloppy handwriting are a turn-off.
- Be prepared to be interviewed on the spot. Dress appropriately for business. (While nose and tongue rings might be cool among your friends, most employers still frown upon their use in the workplace.)

- Practice talking about yourself: the more comfortable you are, the better. Make eye contact, shake hands firmly and show confidence. Be positive, answer in full sentences and talk about your skills and achievements.
- Learn something about the company where you want to work; it shows you have an interest.
- Follow up. At the end of the interview, thank the interviewer for the opportunity. Ask when you will be notified if you have the job. Write a thank-you note to the interviewer. Follow up with the interviewer if you don't hear back within a week.
- Consider alternatives: If you can afford to, attend summer school or volunteer. This experience will look great on your application next year.