First lady Jill Biden highlights high school programs at Bates Technical College

October 11, 2022

First lady Dr. Jill Biden visited Bates Technical College’s South Campus on Friday, Oct. 7 to tour youth apprenticeship and the Technical High School programs that connect youth to hands-on workforce education while they earn their high school diploma. The visit included a stop at the Technical High School’s Back-To-School Night, where students gathered to celebrate the start of the academic year and elect their inaugural student government representatives.

Bates Technical College President Dr. Lin Zhou expressed her gratitude that Biden chose to highlight technical education and youth-focused workforce education programs like the college’s Technical High School during her trip to Washington state.

“We are honored to spotlight our excellent career training programs, Technical High School and youth apprenticeship opportunities during first lady Jill Biden’s historic visit,” said Zhou. “We are thrilled that Dr. Biden chose to recognize our college as an innovator in creating career pipelines that connect high school and adult students to resources and opportunities.”

Assistant Secretary for the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education Amy Loyd, Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier, Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards, and Bates Technical High School Principal Yifan Sun also joined Biden and Zhou on the tour. The group visited the Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) and Welding programs, and joined high school students in the auditorium for a back-to-school event.

Her first stop was in the HVAC classroom, where she met 2022 graduate Jayla Cureton, who is 18 years old and works a $30 per hour job as an HVAC technician for MacDonald-Miller, one of the leading commercial refrigeration companies in the nation.

“At Bates, I definitely learned the skills I need to enter the industry, and I thank my instructors for that,” Cureton told Biden. “I enjoy what I do, and it is really fun.”

HVAC students and instructor Rob Renfro showed Biden several projects the group was working on before Biden wished the students good luck and headed toward the auditorium for the Back-To-School Night event.

Following an introduction from Zhou, Biden spoke to the group about the importance of technical education and pursuing their career goals at a young age. “What a great opportunity to [tour] the school…From what I have heard, many of you are on your way to a successful career.”

After speaking with a handful of students and learning more about what their goals are, she departed with this piece of advice:

“Get involved in making your communities better, because that’s really what life is all about.”

The final stop was the Welding program, where instructors Liberty Olson and Teo Oreiro, and students Emmely Tran, Joseph Cusick, Brighton Benzien, and a handful of other welding students, showed the group various projects and tools.

At 16 years old, Benzien is already working as a welder and earning $25 per hour. The high school student is currently in his fifth quarter and will graduate spring 2023 with an Associate of Applied Science degree and a Washington state high school diploma--at just 17 years old.

The welding students presented Biden with a hand-welded name plate with her name in cursive. Biden exclaimed, “Thank you! Isn’t that thoughtful?”

The first lady later referenced the name plate on her Facebook page, writing, “In all my years of teaching, this is by far my favorite name plate! Thank you to the high school students at Bates Technical College for such a thoughtful gift — I know the perfect spot for it at the White House.”

Said Benzien, "Meeting Dr. Jill Biden was a great experience for me to show the pride in my school and the work it has led me to. This event allowed the students to shed light on the amazing style of hands-on education that has brought me and many other students success is exactly what we needed at Bates!"

Speaking to the group of media representatives in the audience, Biden said, “[Two-year] colleges are a key to offering hands-on learning and job training. I think colleges are doing more and more of this, where students are identifying their interests early so, they’re saving time, and more focused on what they’re going to do in life…It is an amazing and wonderful opportunity for all these students,” said Biden.

She thanked the media for their presence and bringing awareness to the opportunities high school students have to earn their diploma and degree at the same time, getting a head-start on their career.

“It’s impressive what [the college] is doing,” said Biden.

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