



Surveying work holds the students' attention at the Cottage Grove project.

Remember field trips in high school? Some were just a chance to goof off, but others impressed you for a lifetime — such as influencing your path post-graduation. And that's the reason twelve students from Reynolds Learning Academy in Fairview took a road trip to Cottage Grove recently. They visited Region 2's [OR 99: Urban Upgrades](#) project, hoping for a glimpse at a potential career. They got that and more, according to Angie Gilbert, Reynolds' School-to-Work/Trades coordinator.

"These visits always provide us with insight into the multitude of trades who work at sites like these," Gilbert said. "I think it was great for them to see a young foreman and fairly young crew as well."

Suulutaaq is the prime contractor on the project, and the project coordinator, Joel Zeni, is just 32 years old.

"Joel is a graduate of Thurston High School who has both forestry and civil engineering degrees," said Paul Joiner, Region 2 field coordinator for our Office of Civil Rights, who organized the event. "He is currently managing Suulutaaq contracts and crews for seven ODOT projects."

Take your pick

Zeni and Suulutaaq, a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise, were supportive of the students' visit to the project, which aims to improve safety and traffic flow on this busy in-town highway. The project is adding bike lanes and ADA-compliant sidewalks, changing the roadway to one lane in each direction with a center turn lane, and more.

"When we asked Suulutaaq if they would mind a tour of kids coming through, they jumped at the opportunity and even made sure that they had a few different types of work going on to demonstrate," said Pat Woodhurst, P.E. , assistant resident engineer on the project.

Students got to experience excavating, pipe laying, surveying work and traffic control.

"They found it very valuable," Gilbert said. "They learned a bit about surveying and were able to see and understand the pieces of the project the team was working on not only that day but everything that came before and will follow."

A long-term, mutually beneficial relationship

Civil Rights' Joiner has worked with the Reynolds Learning Academy for most of the program's 20-year existence. He tries to find contractors that are DBEs, but that's not often possible. Regardless, every contractor he's worked with has been eager to help show young adults what goes on at a project. In fact, Joiner has seen many RLA students go directly into these professions after they graduate.

"This is a program that provides positive results for kids that might not be college-focused by providing quality exposure to the trades," he said.

Joiner said the support he receives from the Region 2 team for these outings is critical.

"I'm fortunate to have some great co-workers who always step up when asked," he said. "Vidal Francis, Astrid Potter, Julie Gunung always show support and are great with kids! Astrid provided a tour last spring for RLA and they loved it!"

And it's not just the students that benefit; there may be some potential new employees in these groups!

"The students enjoyed how open people were in talking about their paths to the trades and the benefits and pay offered through projects with ODOT," Gilbert said.