



## AUTO EDUCATION 2.0: Revolutionary Collision Repair Center Opens in Springfield

by Joel Gausten

**The future of collision repair education can be found in Springfield, MA.**

Launched in December, the Roger Putnam Vocational Technical Academy's brand-new Collision Repair Center stands as one of the most state-of-the-art facilities of its kind in the nation. Currently serving 80 students, Putnam's program follows the I-CAR Professional Development Program and an advanced NATEF curriculum. The school's vast array of high-tech equipment includes two simulated paint sprayers, an OTC Genesys automotive scanner, a Chisum frame ma-

chine, a Smartboard to view webinars, a spraybooth set up for waterborne and solvent, a mixing room and a paint deck. They even have a facial recognition scanner! By the end of Putnam's four-year course, students have the basic skills needed to handle mechanical, electrical, body, paint and frame repair.

Putnam's high quality standards are maintained by a team of instructors including John Kennedy, Ray Lapite and Ken Downes. A Putnam graduate and former body shop technician, Kennedy views his role at Putnam as an opportunity to change the collision repair industry for the better.

"A lot of teachers take it as a 'retire-

ment home' when they move into a vocational school," he offers. "We don't think like that; we want to be cutting edge. We try to make things better for the student. The more we offer students, the greater the chances are that they can improve the quality of their lives."

The Collision Repair department's commitment to preparing students for life in the professional world has earned praise and gratitude from the Springfield community.

"We've been very lucky to have a high level of parental support," Kennedy says. "We invite the parents to come on in at any time, and they can see what we're

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**Above:** The Roger Putnam Vocational Technical Academy of Springfield, MA. (Photo courtesy of John Kennedy.)

**Left:** Embracing new technologies (such as this simulated paint sprayer) has enabled Putnam Vocational to offer a truly unique educational experience. (Photos courtesy of Gary Cloutier)



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doing and have their questions answered. We want them to feel comfortable coming to us."

Much of the program's ongoing success can be attributed to an active Advisory Committee comprised of parents, students, shop owners, vendors and insurers. A 1982 Putnam graduate, committee co-chairman and AASP/MA member Craig Gridley (Larry's Auto Body, Ludlow) is continually impressed by what the program has to offer.

"Being the co-chairman is easy for me because of the good job Mr. Kennedy does," he says. "The kids are lucky to have him as a teacher. He knows a lot of people in our business, and he keeps in contact with us and keeps up to date on things in the industry."

Currently manager of Balise Collision Repair in Springfield, Committee Co-Chair Brian Kratovil graduated from Putnam in 1980 and couldn't be more pleased with Kennedy's continued progress.

"John got it right," he says. "He knows what's out there, and he wants to prepare his students for that."

The Advisory Committee also includes AASP/MA Board Secretary Gary Cloutier, who once employed both Kennedy and Gridley at his shop (Cloats Auto Body) and recently toured Putnam at their invitation.

"The school is unbelievable!" he says. "I've never seen anything like it. I wish we had a school like that when I was a kid. It looks like a mall!"

When asked what tomorrow's technicians need to possess if they hope to succeed in this industry, Cloutier is quick to stress the importance of a good work ethic.

"The number one thing is that you're showing up on time, and you're doing your job while you're here," he says. "When you're done doing your job and you need something else to do, you come to me and ask. [My employees] better be productive, or I don't need them. They have to be hungry and have a thirst for learning."



Putnam instructor John Kennedy checks out the school's new facial recognition system.  
(Photo courtesy of Gary Cloutier)

Not surprisingly, Kennedy applies his old employer's mindset when dealing with students.

"John told me he that he uses me as an example when he tells kids about showing up to work on time," Cloutier says. "He tells them, 'Early is on time, on time is late and late means you're

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going to be fired."

Above all, Cloutier is proud to see Kennedy doing so much to help the automotive community.

"We may have lost a good body man, but we gained a better person because he's a teacher," he says. "He's contributing back."

Like many other shop owners in the area, Gridley has made good use of Kennedy's stellar student base over the years.

"Putnam's program has been a very good resource for a lot of the shops around here," he says. "A lot of them hire students. You'd just be amazed by how many actually do get hired around here."

Thanks to the program's successful co-op program, students get a chance to experience the real world of collision repair long before graduation.

"Instead of coming to school, they go to work; they're getting experience and getting paid," Kennedy explains. "Once our students are on a co-op, most of them like to stay out there. They keep their academic grades up so that they can maintain their jobs. At the same time, they get real world, live work experience out in a real collision repair shop."

One of Gridley's Putnam hires, Nick Alberto, has worked for Larry's Auto Body for the past year and credits the school with giving him the skills necessary to survive and grow in a professional setting.

"I wouldn't be where I am in this industry if it wasn't for Putnam," he says. "Mr. Kennedy always preached quality and punctuality. If we were sitting on a stool working on something, he'd say, 'You're unemployable; you can't be sitting down on the job!'"

In addition to receiving considerable support from area shops, Kennedy's department benefits from ongoing buy-in from school administrators. While some collision repair programs struggle to receive the funding (or even the attention) they deserve, Kennedy credits Principal Gil Traverso and Vocational Director Hilary Weisgerber for helping the program maintain its high standards.

"They really believe that the school should be state of the art and simply the best," he says. "That kind of attitude and

support has enabled us to move forward."

Proud of his school's accomplishments, Traverso is quick to praise Putnam's collision repair educators for going above and beyond in supporting their students.

"They do a phenomenal job for our kids," he says. "Together, they make a great team."

A licensed electrical contractor, Traverso not only understands the demand for a skilled workforce, but also sees a growing appreciation for trades like collision repair throughout society.

"In years past, people were directing students to vocational schools who they felt weren't college-bound," he explains. "It's almost as if they had this lower echelon of student that they were sending to vocational schools, which is absolutely absurd. In my years in the trade, some of the smartest people were tradespeople! We worked hard in trying to get the school counselors within the city of Springfield at the middle school level educated in terms of what we do here in the building and what the expectations are."

While the Academy stands as a prime example of what can be achieved with a collision education through parental and administrative support, more help from the collision repair industry – the folks who ultimately benefit from a trained workforce – is always needed and appreciated. After spending years on the frontlines of the automotive education issue, Gridley has a very clear message for his fellow AASP/MA members.

"I want them to realize that we have kids graduating who are capable of starting in a shop," he says. "They're not just there to wash a car or clean up the shop. We have kids working on late-model cars, and these teachers are working hard to make sure the teachers know what they're doing. They deserve a job, and it's our job to keep these kids interested in the industry so they don't leave it."

Shops interested in assisting the Putnam collision repair program in any way are encouraged to contact Gridley at (413) 583-5738.



## SCRS Announces 40th Affiliate Association

The Society of Collision Repair Specialists (SCRS) recently announced that it has enrolled its 40th state or regional organization as an affiliate association of SCRS. The Utah Auto Body Association, the first statewide collision repair association in Utah's history, is now an affiliate of SCRS.

"There's been a growing interest in forming an association in our state for some time, given the rapid changes our industry is experiencing," explained Chairman Bob Torrey, who was part of the organizing group forming the association. "Our belief is that we will be better equipped to handle the challenges facing us if we are united in our efforts and communicate well with each other. With the help of Janet Chaney of the CARS Cooperative, who was instrumental in helping us see the advantages of coming together and how to do it effectively, we've begun making rapid progress toward this goal."

"Our initial emphasis is seeking out quality training and education for our members," continued Torrey. "We are also committed to working effectively with the state legislature to ensure the interests of our industry are well-represented."

The association's November membership meeting examined the potential impact on collision repairers of recently-enacted laws pertaining to air quality standards and featured a Utah legislator as their guest speaker. SCRS Executive Director Aaron Schulenburg said, "The boundless energy and enthusiasm of the Utah Auto Body Association will pay great dividends for the repairers in Utah who will benefit from having a united statewide voice for the first time. We couldn't be more proud to mark the monumental occasion of welcoming a 40th Affiliate Association, than we are with the addition of these passionate representatives from Utah."

For more information on SCRS, please visit [www.scrs.com](http://www.scrs.com).

