

Algonquin College provides students with *Options*

By Jamie Bramburger, Manager of Community and Student Affairs, Algonquin College in the Ottawa Valley

Algonquin College and Renfrew County's District School Boards have a winning formula when it comes to engaging employers in addressing the shortage of skilled trades workers in the region. For the past seven years, the college and the school boards have worked with *Passport to Prosperity* to coordinate a skilled trades fair that is attended by more than 2,000 high school students each year.

The skilled trades fair is known as *Options* because it encourages students to think of options other than college and university, and in 2008 the fair was recognized with an Award of Excellence by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. This year, in addition to the participation of over 50 employers and exhibitors, there were 12 skills competitions ranging from cooking and webpage design, to tire changing and small engine repair, involving 215 student competitors from several area high schools. Since *Options* began in 2002, the number of registered apprentices in Renfrew County has increased from 300 to 540 active apprentices in 2009.

Options also supports high school students in making the transition from school to work. Each year, *Passport to Prosperity* administers a bursary program on behalf of the school boards that rewards four students with a \$400 bursary if they secure an apprenticeship upon graduation from high school. In fact, the team carpentry competition at *Options* generates funding for the bursaries through a community auction featuring the sheds built by the competing students.

The *Options* Skilled Trades Fair is a great example of a grassroots business-education partnership that is helping students transition from the classroom to the workplace.



Student Sean O'Brien gains hands-on experiential learning at *OPTIONS* in Pembroke, Ontario, in May 2009.

Photo Information: Sean O'Brien, Grade 12, left, and Chris Ledgerwood, Grade 11, are students at Arnprior and District High School who recently competed in a skills competition at the Options Skilled Trades Fair in Pembroke, ON. Their four-person crew was one of nine high schools to enter a carpentry team in a skills competition to build a garden shed. The sheds were auctioned off at the end of the competition with the money raised going to bursaries for student apprentices.