

N.A.T.I.V.E. Vocational District supports student pathways through hands-on learning and regional collaboration

Connecting students across communities

Students from across northeastern Arizona traveled to Chinle High School to take part in the SkillsUSA Arizona Region 8 competition, bringing together participants from Ganado, Piñon, Sanders, Window Rock, Tuba City, Monument Valley and Red Mesa. The event is part of a broader effort led by the Northeast Arizona Technological Institute of Vocational Education, known as N.A.T.I.V.E., an overlay Career and Technical Education district serving students across three counties. Spanning more than 22,000 square miles, the district connects students in rural and tribal communities to hands-on learning opportunities, often across long distances.

Across classrooms, workshops and competition spaces, students prepared to demonstrate the skills they have been developing in their Career and Technical Education programs, from welding and construction to public speaking, design and customer service. The event created more than a competitive setting. It provided a shared space where students could represent their schools, connect with peers and see their learning in action.

“Competing is basically representing my community and my school as a whole,” said **Shinea Golden, a junior from Ganado High School.**

For many students, that sense of representation is closely tied to purpose, showing not only what they have learned but what is possible. The gathering also reflects the importance of regional collaboration. By bringing multiple schools together in one location, the district expands access to experiences that may not be available at every campus while strengthening connections among students and educators across communities.



Turning classroom learning into real-world experience

The regional competition serves as an early step in the SkillsUSA pathway, preparing students for state and national opportunities while reinforcing classroom instruction. Each contest challenges students to apply technical knowledge in real time, solve problems under pressure and demonstrate professional skills. Whether completing a welding project, delivering a prepared speech or troubleshooting an automotive issue, students are asked to think critically and adapt.

These experiences help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world expectations. Students are not only practicing technical skills but also building confidence, communication and independence. For many participants, this is one of the first opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in a high-stakes, real-world setting, an experience that can shape how they see themselves and their future.

That experience is especially meaningful in fields such as welding and other skilled trades, where employers continue to face workforce shortages as experienced workers retire. Opportunities like SkillsUSA help students build technical skills early and see a clear connection between classroom learning and careers that are in high demand.



The role of mentorship in student growth

Behind each student is an educator guiding that growth. Across the N.A.T.I.V.E. district, CTE teachers play a critical role in helping students build both technical expertise and self-confidence. “I struggled to get where I’m at right now, and just to have all these girls and boys believe in me and what I can do and teach them, that’s just a big plus on what I’m doing,” said **Richard Overturf, a CTE welding instructor.**

That perspective reflects a broader approach to CTE across the region, one rooted in mentorship, persistence and relationships. Educators are not only teaching skills; they help students recognize their own potential. Competitions like SkillsUSA reinforce that work by giving students a chance to apply what they have learned and receive feedback in a supportive environment.

Building a sustainable pathway for the future



District leaders see these efforts as part of a larger, long-term vision for student success and community impact. “I’m a product of CTE, and so I’ve gone through the CTE programs. We do have CTE teachers who were once upon a time students. Now they’re back and they’re teaching,” said **Jeremy Curtis, ASBA Navajo County director**. This cycle highlights the strength of locally rooted pathways, where students gain skills, pursue careers and in some cases return to support the next generation.

Through partnerships with colleges and universities, N.A.T.I.V.E. also provides opportunities for dual credit and early college access, helping students transition more seamlessly into postsecondary education and careers. By investing in CTE programs and creating opportunities for regional collaboration, the district is helping build a sustainable system that connects education to workforce needs while maintaining strong community ties. Nationally, students who participate in organizations like SkillsUSA graduate at a rate of about 94 percent, underscoring the value of hands-on learning, mentorship and strong support systems.

“It’s always fun to step out of your comfort zone and become a more well-rounded person and develop skills not only for school but a life after school in the workforce,”

said **Jake, an Apache junior at Sanders High School and SkillsUSA executive board member.**

Link to website: <https://azsba.org/n-a-t-i-v-e-vocational-district-supports-student-pathways-through-hands-on-learning-and-regional-collaboration/>

Link to video: https://youtu.be/3M4O_3piR80

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