

School's out, work's in

But job-seeking teens are finding it tougher to find employment these days.

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BY JERRY DAVICH Times Features Writer

Six days a week, Jade Bowman slips into her red, one-piece swimsuit, slides into comfy flip-flops and goes to work at Splash Down Dunes Water Park in Porter.

The 16-year-old Chesterton High School junior is a lifeguard there. It's her first job. She makes \$6.15 an hour and gets all the fun in the sun she can handle.

"I needed this job. I have to pay for my gas, clothes, insurance and food," said Bowman, who works from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on most days. "But it's a bummer not being able to go to the beach with my friends."

Bowman's boss, Dan Cypra, said of the park's 80 or so employees, the majority by far is teen-agers. But Bowman is the exception to the rule these days when it comes to teens and summer jobs.

Hey, she has one.



Bowman is among a declining number of teens who are employed this summer. (Gregg Gearhart / The Times)

Though the national unemployment rate is at 6 percent, that figure jumps to 16 percent for teens her age, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. And that's almost 3 percent higher than the teen unemployment rate last year at this time.

Last summer, 57 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds worked or looked for a job -- the lowest percentage since 1964, according to the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics. And that rate has been declining steadily since 1978, when it peaked at 69 percent.

But the good news is that teens change jobs about as often as they change clothes, which creates openings all the time. About six out of 10 teens are looking for a job this summer -- and employers know it. That's why many of them don't advertise their openings to teens, said Renee Ward, founder of Teens4Hire.org, a national online job matching service for teens and employers.

Ward surveyed more than 1,000 potential employers of teens and 95 percent of them said they don't advertise to that group.

So how's a teen to know who might hire them?

"Ask!," Ward said. "Go into an establishment and look for a sign that says they are hiring, or ask to speak directly with the hiring manager."

Teens4Hire.org's job is to bridge the gap between teens looking for jobs and employers who will hire them, Ward said.

The best place still for teens to find work is in the restaurant and food industry, she said. Other seasonally hot workplaces include retail outlets like malls, public swimming pools, recreational parks and lawn services.

The Labor Department reports the average wage for teen workers this summer is in the \$6-an-hour range. Last year -- before the Sept. 11 attacks and the sagging economy -- it was \$6.75.

And employers this summer are leaning toward hiring older teens. Work permits issued for 17-year-olds increased by 9 percent compared with the previous year, while permits for 14- and 15-year-olds decreased by 23 percent.

Pam Stalling, director of Consumer Credit Counseling Services in Gary, said today's teens not only are competing for jobs with other high school sophomores, but college sophomores, too. The job market is simply that tight. "It's a lot tougher than it used to be," she said.

Another reason so few teens are working today than in years past is that summer school enrollment has doubled since 1989, according to the Labor Department. Last year alone, nearly a third of U.S. teens were enrolled in some kind of school in July, the peak month of summer employment.

That compares with nearly 20 percent in 1994.

MORE INFORMATION

What jobs are hot -- Fast food and restaurants -- Entertainment parks -- Grocery stores -- Hardware and building supply stores -- Hotels and resorts -- Gas and service stations -- Clothing and accessory stores -- Movie theaters -- Park and recreational facilities -- Day and summer camps -- Childcare providers -- Construction companies Source: Teens4Hire.org Did you know? The most common jobs for teens are food preparation and service positions, such as waiters and cooks and sales. The top jobs for girls are cashiers, waitresses and food counter jobs. For boys, they are cooks, cashiers and stock handlers and baggers. The average hourly wage for teens last year was \$6.75 an hour. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Teen employment - now and then In July 2001, nearly 22.3 million teens were employed In July 1991, 20.9 million In July 1981, 23.9 million In July 1951, 11 million Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Summer job tips * Make a list of jobs in which you're interested. * Ask yourself if you would like to work indoors or outdoors, in a retail store or a restaurant. What are you good at? What skills do you have? What would you like to try? * Apply to places in your neighborhood. * Dress for business -- keep the nose and tongue rings at home. * Be prepared. Have a profile or resume of your work, education and extracurricular activities handy to fill out an application. * Complete the application neatly and spell words correctly. Employers want to see this type of attention to detail. Tips for your job interview * Shake hands firmly with the interviewer. Smile and make eye contact. * Be positive and take your time answering questions. Answer in full sentences and talk about what you bring to the job. Brag about yourself and back it up with proof. * At the end of the interview, thank the interviewer for the opportunity. Ask when you will be notified if you get the job. Write a thank you note to the interviewer. * Follow up with the interviewer if you don't hear back within a week. If at first you don't succeed, brush it off. Remain positive and move on to the next possibility. Source: Teens4Hire.org Surf the Internet for help www.summerjobs.com allows job searches by country, state and city www.seasonaljobs.net allows search by location or job field www.jobmonkey.com allows searches for seasonal and year-round jobs worldwide www.Teens4Hire.org allows job matching service for teenagers and employers