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Mike Kendall wants to earn an MBA after finishing his undergraduate degree with the t buyout he accepted from Ford Motor Co.
Photo credit: REBECCA COOK

Buying into education Schools attract students getting tuition aid from Ford buyout

By [Chad Halcom](#)

Mike Kendall of South Lyon was helping send two children to college at once on his **Ford Motor Co.** salary: His daughter, a **Michigan State University** student, and his son, who attends **Schoolcraft Community College**.

Now, Ford is putting a third member of the family through school — Kendall himself.

"I guess I haven't figured out yet what I want to be when I grow up," said Kendall, 49, a toolmaker who left the automaker May 31 under an employee buyout program that provides \$15,000 a year toward tuition reimbursement.

"I want eventually to get an MBA, because I have enough credits now that I could conceivably get that in the time I've got, plus it's something that can help me in several different careers."

With previous course credits from continuing education courses and work-related training, Kendall is a junior this fall at **Eastern Michigan University** in addition to working part-time at a tool-and-die shop in Warren. With four years of reimbursement, he hopes to get a bachelor's degree in engineered manufacturing technology and then a master's.

Ford estimates that at least 14,000 employees like Kendall took a nontraditional buyout package such as the ones that offer two-year or four-year college tuition reimbursement. But that category of buyout packages also includes lump-sum payments and other arrangements excluding tuition, and the automaker would not disclose exactly how many of those employees actually went back to school.

Washtenaw Community College ranked No. 1 on Ford's list, and has at least 218 former Ford employees enrolled in programs this semester. The school places its total enrollment in the recently completed summer semester at 7, summer 2006.

Data obtained by *Crain's* from local colleges that ranked highest on Ford's list of reimbursement schools suggests the total number of er is no higher than 3,000. The greatest enrollment is going to western suburban institutions and to community colleges. (See chart, this p

In all, 480 colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada had former Ford employees who took the nontraditional buyouts enroll. Near Ford's list are in Southeast Michigan, said Marcey Evans, health care and labor relations public-affairs manager for Ford. In all, 27,000 o took buyout packages sometime between last November and Sept. 1.

"Many of those schools will have only one or two students, or 10, or more depending on where they're located," Evans said. "It's a prett the some strong buyout activity has been. Each of the top three schools is somewhat close to the ACH (Automotive Component Holding Washtenaw County (which Ford has closed)."

Evans would not release specific numbers of students at each school citing employee privacy among other concerns.

"One-in-nine, though, would match almost exactly my expectation of the interest (in education packages)," said David Littmann, a form economist and now a specialist for the **Mackinac Center for Public Policy**. "You have to give those people the discretion to look at th numbers and decide what's the best investment in their future."

Littmann said he was not surprised at the heavier interest in community colleges since many students likely arrived in their first careers college or vocational education programs.

"These are going to be very experienced and skilled people with a history of learning by doing, as opposed to thriving in the university en theoretical," he said. "And you have to keep those people around to keep the local economy going."

Many schools did not have exact head counts of their buyout class but said they had pursued students through buyout "opportunity fair Ford plants.

"For us, there was an advantage of location, and we have a very active vocational applied sciences program where they (students) coul their previous field," said John Rinke, student support administrative associate for Washtenaw Community College, whose department h in fairs at Ford.

"Many of them could and did want to take advantage of a program that could return them to work quickly."

Further down the list, **Wayne State University** has an estimated 60 buyout students enrolled.

Ahmad Ezzeddine, associate vice president of educational outreach at WSU, said he is not surprised that community colleges like Washt and **Henry Ford Community College** outperformed his school in picking up Ford buyouts. He sensed many Ford workers were after th job.

"My sense was, a lot of these were working people with families who were more interested in something that could get them retrained weren't ready to be full-time students for a four-year program," he said.



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"I also suspect even those that did might prefer to get the earliest coursework at community college and (cheaper) before transferring to a four-year college," Koenig said.

Ronald Koenig, a professor of social work at the **University of Detroit Mercy**, said the committee hosted a conference in June on education for 1,000 or so Ford employees in that region who took buyouts. Koenig also is a member of an educational facilitation committee at the **Urban Regional 1A** for western Wayne County in Taylor.

Koenig said the committee hosted speakers from the University of Detroit Mercy and a **Michigan Works!** workforce development office on entrepreneurship, as well as tax rules and changes that would affect small business owners.

The speakers drew some interest, Koenig said, but it was hard to gauge how many workers were considering a move to become self-employed. Only 35-40 buyout employees attended the event, he said — possibly because of poor communication with the workers who had already accepted buyout packages.

"Out of 1,000 workers, we had figured on maybe at least 100 showing up," he said. "But it seemed as if part of the problem was that some workers were not aware of a (buyout package) with that stroke of the pen you were no longer in the union and it was harder to communicate with people who were not in the union."

"Or it may have been hard to change your choice once you had made it."

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