

CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION

ENDING THE CONSTRUCTION WORKFORCE DROUGHT IN TEXAS

The booming construction industry faces a problem that continues to worsen - a shortage of qualified workers. Despite significantly raising salaries and providing lucrative bonuses, Texas contracting companies are struggling to recruit skilled workers to perform everyday construction work. Several factors contribute to the shortage, and it will take an industry-wide effort to refill the labor pool in Texas.

A partial cause of the labor shortage can be traced back to the Great Recession in 2008 when the construction industry lost nearly a third of its workers to other industries. Even though the economy largely recovered, the construction workforce did not. As baby boomers began to retire in droves, companies began to lose a large chunk of their skilled workers. Young people were pushed away from construction jobs due to the stigma associated with manual labor and a renewed push towards pursuing college degrees. At the same time, schools slashed a major pipeline for new employees - vocational or "career and technical education" (CTE) programs.


Industry organizations, private companies, and Texas schools are making an effort to develop CTE programs. For example, TEXO, the largest commercial contractors association in Texas, is actively working to bridge the gap between Dallas/Fort Worth high school construction vocational programs and the local construction communities. Additionally, the Association of General Contractors (AGC) of America and AGC-Texas Building Branch recently launched a campaign called "Texas Builds" to grow interest in construction careers. Private companies are investing in the industry, as well. For instance, Home Depot announced its intention to donate \$50 million to train new, skilled laborers. Not to be outdone, Lowe's announced a new pilot program

to give \$2,500 to employees who wish to take courses relating to construction careers.

Fortunately, CTE programs are seeing a revival in Texas schools. The Texas Education Agency continues to promote CTE programs in districts across Texas. For example, Tyler ISD saw 80% of its students participate in at least one CTE course. Lubbock ISD recently received \$200,000 to expand its CTE program. Allen ISD and Plano ISD also maintain strong CTE programs that offer courses in a variety of fields.

One hurdle to growing CTE programs is the lack of qualified teachers. Teacher salaries often cannot compete with the salaries available in the field, and schools lack the funding to make teaching positions more lucrative. State lawmakers have recognized this issue and taken steps in recent legislative sessions to spur CTE programs in school districts across Texas. For instance, lawmakers recently passed a bill that exempts qualifying districts from certain teaching certification requirements, which made hiring CTE teachers much easier. Another bill created a work-based education program that helps students earn a high school diploma and an industry certification. Even higher education institutions are encouraging students to earn industry certifications.

The construction industry is one of the most significant segments of the United States economy,

and the opportunities it provides so many to not only put food on the table but also pursue the "American Dream" are simply endless. The more active the construction industry becomes in connecting with the youth of this country to share and expand the wealth of opportunities and the more companies support and invest in CTE programs, the better served we will all be. And, as a result, the Texas economy - led in large part by a thriving construction industry - will continue to boom. 

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