

Building steps to fill the labor shortage

John Topp
March 23, 2006

On March 1, the Allied Construction Employers Association in conjunction with the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin's Building Advantage Program sponsored the fourth annual All-Construction Career Day at the Waukesha County Expo Center.

Hundreds of school children from all over southeastern Wisconsin attended the event, where they participated in hands-on demonstrations, learned to safely use tools and materials, heard about career opportunities and asked questions of trade representatives.

The purpose of the event was to promote the building trades to middle- and high-school students who perhaps weren't aware of a construction career. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 1 million new jobs will be created for employees in the skilled construction trades between 2002 and 2012. BLS estimates that the construction industry will need to fill 240,000 positions each year to keep pace with the growth demands and to replace workers who leave the industry.

To meet this labor need, union groups continue to develop programs, such as the All-Construction Career Day, targeting youth, shop teachers and guidance counselors. This month's program was phenomenally well received, with more than 1,100 in attendance. To guide us with future programs, we surveyed the teachers who attended the event and the following are some of the results:

- The majority of educators stated their students don't know enough about construction trades to even form an opinion about it as a career choice. This suggests that the problem is lack of knowledge, not perception.
- 60 percent of these schools offer trades-related classes; however, many of these courses are threatened by ongoing budget cuts in the school systems.
- Only 27 percent say school guidance counselors share information with students about construction career opportunities, suggesting that construction as a career is not among the choices regularly promoted to students by counselors.
- Of those educators who don't promote the construction trades as a career path, half indicated they need outside help in providing resources and would be interested in sharing this information with students.

Promising future

Although these results show there is still a lot of work to be done, there is promise on the horizon. I attended the Wisconsin Technology Education Association's annual conference in the Wisconsin Dells a few weeks ago. The teachers I spoke with were very enthusiastic about what they do -- exposing students to various trades while teaching them the basics of various crafts. They start at the beginning by laying the groundwork -- the basic skills that students will use throughout careers in the trades.

This is the most important step in the education process.

We are aware that as technologies and techniques evolve, the work force must change with them. We have an opportunity to show our appreciation for the WTEA's efforts. By supporting its hard work, we ultimately support the future of the trades. Supplying teachers with materials and information that can be used in day-to-day instruction, visiting classrooms to bring the trades directly to students and becoming mentors are all areas that will help teachers.

I applaud the WTEA's enthusiasm and appreciate its efforts. Seeing the success of events such as the Career Day and the WTEA conference reminds me there are dedicated teachers and representatives from member organizations that are fully committed to the future success of the trades.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and the Building Advantage initiative.