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Good Jobs Are Begging For Skilled Workers

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We have an aging workforce in Vermont and a student population that is confused by the choice to pursue a traditional college education or prepare for a career in the trades. It's a fact: businesses across the state lack trained employees to fill good paying jobs. We can build a better Vermont by utilizing the skills and talents of our youth while improving our workforce to ensure good paying jobs and companies remain in Vermont. This needs to be the focus of everyone in the state, as this is how we will grow our economy and employ Vermonters.

The construction industry has been hit particularly hard by an aging workforce and a lack of young men and women trained for construction industry jobs. Contractors, large and small, report they are in need of people with professional skills in a wide variety of construction occupations. For example, according to national construction labor market analyzer data, more than 2,800 carpentry jobs are vacant, as are 13-hundred heavy equipment operator positions, more than 600 pipefitters, more than 500 sheet metal positions, 400 plasterers, and 500 bricklayers just to name a few. And, these numbers are perhaps underreported.

Trained, skilled craftsmen and women have opportunities to have an annual income on par with traditional college graduates. For instance, experienced carpenters (the backbone of the construction industry) can earn a yearly income of nearly \$60,000; experienced plumbers can demand nearly \$70,000 annually; and skilled electricians can earn more that \$60,000 a year. These income levels are not guaranteed to every Technical Career Center student, but without career centers, students will not have the opportunity to even explore these opportunities.

How can Vermont help? We can begin by consistently funding our Technical Career Centers. These schools are caught in-between school budgets and students being encouraged to attend their local high school instead of a technical career center. Without students and the funding that follows them, career centers must terminate programs. In the battle for school funding from the state, students are being pigeon holed into educational situations in which their best talents are not being discovered and developed.

Someone once said, "Students should have the opportunity to be trained in whatever skills their natural gifts and preferences lead them to, rather than condemning them to jobs they will find meaningless." Many of the skills most needed for businesses to compete in the global marketplace are technical skills whose basic fundamentals are available in many of Vermont's Technical Career Centers.

Seems pretty simple to me, and straight to the point. Our economy is built on the strengths of people in the workforce, whatever that workforce that might be. To me ALL education opportunities should be offered on one plate to each student to let their own inquisitive minds decide where they want to go.

Unfortunately, the terms “white collar” and “blue collar” created a deep division within the workforce that we are still trying to bridge. The good news is the bridge is slowly, but surely, being built. The not-so-good news is it’s not happening fast enough.

Students from high schools all over Vermont are very well served by our 16 Technical Career Centers. It’s about time – no, it’s past time to increase our support, both financially and with strong, clear recognition of these programs from other segments of Vermont’s education community.

There is one additional major issue that must be discussed: the direct relationship between embracing skills of students and forcing them into a box where they will not thrive. There is a very real impact on society when students desire hands-on training but are forced into post-secondary education programs that they are not well suited for. Often these students fail, lose a sense of self-worth and become dependent on society’s rather than on their own skills and ambitions.

We can do better. We can build an education system that not only prepares our students for college, but also for a lucrative and rewarding career in the trades. Teachers and parents can encourage students to explore his/her talents through an education system that allows and supports technical school training and traditional high school classrooms. We need to listen first, and then guide the students to their own future.