Construction leaders promote industry as a career path in schools

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To get that percentage of high school students to see construction as an attractive career path, Dunham said members of the Associated General Contractors of Georgia (AGC Georgia) are going into schools to talk about career opportunities in construction, pushing students to come see how buildings get made, and supporting high school programs. Those programs include SkillsUSA, a partnership of students, teachers and industry that provides educational programs, events and competitions that support career and technical education.

“We also need to work with government, our Department of Education and our Technical College System of Georgia on a real coordinated statewide strategy to provide the resources to help those instructors and teachers do an effective and thorough job of training young men and women to be more successful working in the skills trade,” Dunham said.

While the deepening of the Port of Savannah will drive the state’s economic development over the next 10 to 25 years, there are no construction programs in high schools and technical colleges in that region, Dunham noted.

“If we’re not helping grow the adequate workforce here, these projects and the economy suffer,” he said. “That’s why we think this effort is worthy of our organization putting forth its strongest effort in probably anything it’s ever done.”

The first thing that a company considering relocation looks at is where its future workforce will come from, so a strong skilled labor force statewide can only be an asset, Dunham said.

One workforce development strategy is Associated General Contractors’ Regional Alliances, where groups of contractors pool their resources at a local level to partner with local schools and instructors, said Michael E. Kenig, vice chairman of Holder Construction Co. and chair of AGC Georgia’s workforce development committee.

“We try not to make this about a labor shortfall or shortage because we know that an economic downturn will solve that problem for us overnight,” Kenig said. “This is not a short-term problem. The solution that we’re focusing on is employer engagement.”

“We subscribe to the philosophy that good workforce development is good economic development,” he said. “In many situations, we’re paying more than enough as a society to support the four-year kids (college graduates). I keep challenging society, the business community and the construction industry about what are we doing to support the other 75 percent? One of the most important things we can be doing is supporting career and technical education.”

And from the construction industry’s standpoint, Kenig said, not enough is being done to support career and technical education.

“The problem is that the system is so focused on graduation from a four-year college as a measure of success,” he said. “It should be getting people trained to do jobs and getting them funneled into careers.”

AGC Georgia wants students to know about the opportunities that exist within Georgia’s construction workforce and the pathways to get to those opportunities in order to have an opportunity for economic security for themselves and their families and to be able to choose the future that is right for them, Kenig said.

“If we, the business communities, start valuing technical education and these kind of skills and become more skills-based, society will follow,” Kenig said.