

Construction leaders promote industry as a career path in schools

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For at least the past seven years, contractors statewide have been struggling to find workers due to a growing problem of attrition: for every five experienced, skilled construction workers who retire, only one new employee is entering the field.

In order to help fill these jobs with skilled workers, student need to realize there are many construction professions that pay well and offer chances to move up.

Part of the reason there is a shortage of skilled workers is because of the aging population, said **Michael Dunham**, CEO of **Associated General Contractors of Georgia**, a statewide professional trade association representing the commercial construction industry.

"Not a lot of people are doing work with their hands because over the last 30 years everyone starting believing that everyone has to go to college, which is just not true because not everyone was intended to go to college" he said. "In fact, the numbers show that for every 100 students 24 go to college and 76 don't. We need to put a bigger emphasis into that 76 and demonstrate the ability to make a very good living, have a skill set that will last the rest of your life and not come out of college with a huge debt."

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 (ACG 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.



Michael
Dunham

"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 suffers," 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.



Michael
Kenig

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 ACG 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 my opinion, we are doing 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."

ACG 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.