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Enrolling students into skilled trades

By Gerry Beltgens

In the ongoing refrain about the looming "critical skills shortage" it appears that we may be neglecting a significant and accessible local resource, our own high school students. Trades skills are making a comeback as smart students consider learning a skill that can last them a lifetime and allow them to earn an excellent income with little or no student loan debt.

While many people are suggesting that immigration is the only solution to this looming crisis, we may be doing our own children a disservice. We need to pause the rhetoric and examine the facts. We are presently experiencing a strong upturn in construction in the province and while there is a shortage of skilled trades, it is not yet a crisis. The need for skilled trades will continue to be strong for several years. It is projected to increase as the boomer generation retires. Many plan on living in well built and well appointed adult-oriented communities. If we do not plan for that retirement bump we may indeed have a shortage, but it need not be a crisis if we plan now.

Canada's strength has always been its open doors to immigrants from around the world. I am sure that this will continue into the future. To focus on immigration to address our skills shortages, how-

ever, may be short-sighted. We have the answer sitting in our own homes and attending our schools. Many teenagers enjoy working with their hands, working on cars, helping a parent build a deck or repair the cottage. Students who drop out are often bored with the academic curriculum. Given the opportunity, many thrive in the hands-on world of the shop floor or the construction site.

School districts around the province are beginning to address these students before they drop out and within the system. By doing so they are helping the student, the school system and ultimately the needs of a growing province. Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby, Delta and many others now have full time trades training coordinators. Programs such as horticulture, framing, automotive trades, tourism, information management, fabrication and cosmetology are being offered in grades 11 and 12.

Students are finding summer jobs that further their work experience. Participating schools are getting additional funding through the new ACE-IT and existing SSA programs. B.C. industries are benefiting from having trained and enthusiastic employees, ready for further skills development.

Less than 30 per cent of high school students will attend universi-



ty and only about 16 per cent will graduate in the discipline they enrolled in. Yet some schools continue to focus only on an academic stream. This is a disservice to our children, leaving many with large student loans, broken dreams and the need to re-evaluate their career directions.

The Residential Construction Industry Training Organization in partnership with the ITA, CHBA-BC

and school districts around the province has developed a residential construction framing technician program that is hands-on and is built on the traditional apprenticeship model. It is more flexible than the traditional model however, and provides students with useful skills at several levels.

Depending on the model used by the district, grade 10 the students can be exposed to construction site culture and the wide variety of skilled occupations from labourer to project manager. Grade 11 students learn a solid introduction to safety and tool skills, providing First Aid and WHIMIS and Construction Assistant certificates. Students are prepared for the construction site and a summer job.

Grade 12 is a hands-on program that covers concrete forms, house framing, stairs and roof construction. On completion students will have a CHBA-BC Framing Technician Assistant Certificate and their full first level carpentry apprenticeship. Through the Secondary School Apprenticeship program, the student can continue to build their work experience and track their skills in a logbook.

The Framing Technician Level 3 can be completed either in high

school or through a public or private college. Level 3 provides additional skills from level 3 and 4 of the carpentry apprenticeship and also addresses the specific requirements of the residential construction industry. Certified Framing Technician is an ITA recognized Certificate of Qualification (CQ). As one contractor said, "It looks good on the side of a truck".

High schools all over the province are reconsidering trades programs. Students are beginning to see the benefits. Parents appreciate the reduction or elimination of student loans and the benefit of children with good jobs who can afford to move out. Industry is hiring these students right out of high school.

Immigration will always energize the fabric of our country but we must also make sure that our children have the opportunity for these great jobs. They will benefit from being able to learn, build, earn, and participate in this dynamic sector of our economy.

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