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Blue collar jobs gain respect

TRADES COUNCIL LEADER REVIVES CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Mercury News Editorial

For two decades, as shop classes disappeared from middle schools and vocational education withered in high schools, Neil Struthers watched and worried. He was a lone voice warning about the growing disconnect between students without job skills and skilled construction jobs going without workers.

Now his evangelizing is paying off. Struthers, the CEO of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Santa Clara and San Benito Counties, is riding the wave of interest in partnerships between schools and industry. He's got public and private money flowing and high schools and community colleges talking to contractors and building trades groups. And career technical education, which is not simply a new name for vocational education, has made it to the top of Gov. Schwarzenegger's and state Superintendent Jack O'Connell's agendas.

The ultimate vision for career technical education is a continuum of training and work, starting with exposure to careers in middle school, continuing with a blend of job skills and applied academics in high school, and then branching off to work or to advanced courses in community and four-year colleges.

Think of it not as a straight line from school to work but a circuit with loops in which students work summers in the trades, and adult workers go to school evenings, earning advanced certificates and learning to become estimators, contractors or site managers.

These career options are essential for the state's economy and vital for Silicon Valley, too, where there's a shortage not just of engineers with Ph.D.s, but also of workers to build the ``clean rooms" to serve them. Those construction jobs pay good money, too.

Building trades and construction is only one of 15 industry sectors in career technical education. Others include finance and business, engineering and design, manufacturing and product development and -- an area vital to the Valley -- health science and medical technology. But the work that Struthers and the Santa Clara County Construction Careers Association are doing could be a model for other career academies and programs in the valley.

Some pieces are years off, others are falling into place.

- With equipment donated by the building trades, Struthers has helped restart the dormant construction technology academy at Yerba Buena High in the East Side Union High School District. Over three years, the 54 students in the program will be exposed to all facets of building construction. Each summer, 25 students will be paid interns for school

district contractors doing work funded by state and local school bonds. When they graduate, they can move ahead in the line for apprenticeships to become carpenters, electricians, plumbers or heavy machine operators, under agreements that Struthers has struck with the unions. Or they can continue on to college, perhaps for a four-year degree in construction management at Cal-Poly or San Jose State.

- Struthers had created similar internships for San Jose City College students with contractors working on construction projects on campus. The college is planning to add an applied math course to its construction technology program; it will expand its labs and workshops; and it's considering adding a two-year green technology major.

- Struthers' most ambitious goal is to establish the California Construction College, which would be a partnership between the National Labor College, outside of Washington, D.C., and the San Jose/Evergreen Community College District. It would offer college courses and bachelor's degrees to building trades workers who, after years of hard work, are ready to make a transition to manager, teacher or other white-collar job. San Jose/Evergreen Chancellor Rosa Perez is interested in the alliance.

- Last week, on a visit to San Jose, O'Connell proposed expanding the number of career technical academies in the state from 290 to 500. Struthers, who met with O'Connell, would like to see another construction academy in East Side Union. Funding could come from the \$500 million that Schwarzenegger has set aside for career tech facilities.

The result of all of these efforts will be more career options at a time when good jobs may go begging. Blue-collar baby boomers are counting down to retirement. Schwarzenegger wants to double the \$32 billion in construction bonds that voters passed last November, creating thousands of jobs.

The legitimate rap against the old vocational education curriculum was that it stunted the ambition of minority and poor kids by steering them into dead-end jobs. That's still a worry in low-performing high schools, where career tech starts and ends with cosmetology. But there's been a concerted effort to inject academic rigor into career tech standards. More than 4,000 courses statewide now qualify for admission to University of California campuses -- triple the number of four years ago.

Most of today's trades jobs demand advanced training if not a two-year associate's degree. If schools do it right, career tech will be a student's deliberate choice, not a last resort. Political leaders are now coming around to what Struthers has long been preaching.