



ESSENTIAL TRADES NEED YOUNG WORKERS - INSIDE SOURCES

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In California, interest among high school students is increasing dramatically in what is known as career and technical education (CTE) — courses that teach the skills needed for various in-demand industries, such as the construction building trades. The most recent data show nearly [650,000 students](#) enrolled in CTE classes in the Golden State in 2022, up from [370,000 students](#) two years earlier.

The trend stretches across the country. In Maine, enrollment in the state’s high school CTE [courses has swelled](#), expanding offerings. In Illinois, enrollment in CTE surged to about 300,000 students last year. “Some high school programs have had to turn away students due to lack of space,” [says Chalkbeat](#), which tracks education trends.

Interest in the trades among high schoolers comes at a critical time for at least one essential industry: sheet metal and HVAC contracting. With 35,000 highly skilled workers due to retire, the trade needs to fill an even larger pipeline of workers who have completed registered apprenticeship programs accredited by the industry’s standards-setting organization and the Department of Labor.

The pitfalls of a shortfall are significant. Sheet metal contracting underpins the economy, delivering many construction projects such as commercial office towers, stadiums, hospitals, industrial plants, strip malls and data centers.

Nothing can be built without these workers and their employers.

Sheet metal work is unique among the trades. It is the only one that takes raw materials and fabricates the architectural pieces, ductwork and HVAC systems they install. Because the role requires full knowledge of the sheet metal lifecycle — from raw materials and fabrication to installation, testing and balancing — employees of unionized contractors must receive at least four years of registered apprentice training before they graduate to journeyman status and can work on a job site without supervision.

The fate of hundreds of “megaprojects” planned in the United States, a mixture of large infrastructure and commercial projects, is of particular concern. These typically cost at least \$1 billion and require thousands of workers to complete — enough to have a substantial economic effect on the regions where they are located.

Their success hinges on a robust supply of sheet metal contractors who can meet exacting technical and safety standards. The industry is working to attract young men and women by stressing wage and benefit potential, capacity for career growth and opportunities to get paid while learning.

For example, upon completing a union sheet metal apprenticeship program, apprentices can earn up to \$87,500 in their first year and as

much as \$120,000 to \$200,000 in wages and benefits within four to five years of graduating, depending on union affiliation, career path and location. In contrast, new hires in professional services earned \$39,520 last year.

High school students opting for a CTE career track can also avoid college debt, [which averages \\$34,000](#) for a four-year bachelor's degree. Instead, students can get paid for apprenticeships and enter the workforce with money in the bank and no college debt.

The industry is working with Congress to ramp up the sheet metal worker pipeline by improving access to apprenticeship programs nationwide. Companies are [conducting "heavy metal" summer camps](#) for high schoolers in which attendees are immersed in the sheet metal, piping and plumbing trades.

But as vital as the efforts are, more must be done. This means greater focus on apprentice programs to attract young people and a robust campaign to ensure high schoolers know the opportunities.

We need more schools like [Lincoln High School's Engineering and Construction Academy](#) in Stockton, California, where enrollment is brimming and students are exposed to careers in numerous trades to meet the demand.

"I tell the kids that sheet metal work is one of the best trades they can go into," says Jeff Wright, a founder of the school, part-time instructor and a former California Teacher of the Year. "It's a no brainer."