

## **Opinion: Trade school offers success at low cost**

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I don't envy high school students today. They have tough choices to make, and there isn't a clear answer as to which is the best path.

Not too long ago the I was at a United Way function where the speaker was a school superintendent from a disadvantaged area outside of Detroit. The school superintendent was telling students they had two choices — go to college or go to work for the trades.

They needed to choose one because hanging around on street corners was not a viable option. He explained that there are no longer jobs for people with just a high school education.

College and the trades are both good options, but we all know college comes with an immense price tag. That's fine if you're comfortable paying debt for the foreseeable future, but if you don't want to, the trades need people who want to work in plumbing, pipe fitting, carpentry and similar professions.

The trades are facing a major problem. There just aren't enough young people choosing these careers to handle the workload that is coming in the next couple of years.

Around the time of the 2008 recession, there was no big push to bring people into the trades. Ever since, we've been suffering in our numbers.

We had some years with few to no apprentices. When you miss a year or two or three without bringing in new talent, you end up where we are today: with trade professions featuring people who are the oldest they've been since World War II, the average tradesman in his 40s and no prospect of his own kid following in his footsteps, like it used to be.

There is a gaping shortage of young blood in our professions. And with big projects on the horizon for Detroit — the Hudson site, the Book building, the Monroe Block, the new Wayne County Jail (projects that will be running simultaneously) — there simply won't be enough local tradespeople to get the work done.

All the places we used to go for supplemental labor are now fully employed. We have to look further away to bring in enough people to do the work, at a time when more people are leaving the trades for retirement than entering to begin careers.

At this point, we don't have people in their 30s with 10 years of experience to replace the men who are retiring. It's an issue facing the entire country, but glaringly here at home.

We need active recruiting at job fairs and high schools to explain the kind of living, the kind of life, you can build as a tradesperson. We need informational recruiting — pairing information about our industry with a warning that you won't pile up six figures in college loan debt if you go this route.



Antonio Thomas of Warren Mott High School tries his hand at laying bricks under direction from Brad Maurer, of Leidal and Hart Mason Contractors during the third annual Sachse Construction Academy at Eastern Market, in Detroit, Oct. 23, 2018. (Photo: David Guralnick, The Detroit News)

The likelihood that a college graduate today will earn enough to pay back his or her student loans is slim, especially when student loan payments mirror the size of a mortgage payment. Compare that with a journeyman plumber, who's been on the job for five years, earning \$37.74 an hour, including holiday pay — that amounts to \$75,000 per year, with two weeks paid vacation. That's a good living. And there is no steep price tag to get there.

We have to admit that college isn't for everyone and frankly, it shouldn't be. Each young person has his or her own path in life, and we must embrace all the options if we are to do right by our younger people. There are a ton of jobs that need to be filled with a pipeline of interested, trained people to make society work the way we expect it to.

At one time, working with your hands was looked down on; it shouldn't be. That's how I built my career. I started as a plumber and worked my way up to be vice president of the 35th largest general contracting company in the country.

There are all kinds of opportunities for hard-working people, and they are all respectable and valuable. We must change our perspective of what is acceptable and what is not, to guide high school graduates wisely.

College isn't the only path to success and happiness, and we need to stop stigmatizing people who make a living by getting their hands dirty. They, too, build a life worth living.

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