

# Guest Column



For Immediate Release

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## **It's time for innovative policies for tech-ed careers**

*By John Mielke, ABC of Wisconsin President*

Anyone who was in high school prior to 1990 can recall a requirement to take at least one type of technical education class, where you would learn some basic skills about cooking, sewing, metals, woodworking, printing, architecture and the list goes on. The intent was to expose students to a variety of technical education areas and provide insight into career pathways that do not require a four-year university degree. As a result, some students had basic skills to enter the workforce or had a good sense of a worthwhile career area. At the very least, students learned skills that could be applied to everyday life.

Tech ed classes were eventually all but eliminated from our high schools as “college mania” became prevalent and school districts found other uses for its funding. This affected many students who would have been a better fit for hands-on, skilled trades. We all know individuals who say they would have enjoyed a hands-on career. In fact, the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) of Wisconsin Apprenticeship program enrolls a high number of four-year college graduates who have decided to give a hands-on construction career a try instead of their original field of study.

It's a problem when two-thirds of new jobs require a technical degree, but we are sending half of our high school graduates into a four-year university. The University of Wisconsin System's Progress & Completion report reveals that only 65% of incoming freshmen in 2014 have completed their degrees. Unfortunately, many parents and teachers still expect a four-year college degree to lead to a well-paying job and satisfying occupation for everyone. In reality, we are producing too many university graduates for the high-growth jobs of our economy, like those in construction. While many succeed with a four-year degree or higher, others would have been better off seeking a different pathway.

Even prior to the pandemic, the construction industry was facing a severe worker shortage, as were other industries struggling to find workers with technical skills. ABC is promoting a public policy initiative to support and increase technical and career readiness in Wisconsin's K-12 system. With these policies, Wisconsin could provide more career selection options for our young people while helping employers fill some demand-driven occupations.

The policies are intended to maximize labor force participation through K-12 career readiness initiatives. There are three specific initiatives with several tactics for each. The list includes:

1. Increase K-12 Education connection with industry partners, e.g., increased use of industry-based credentials for skills development in high school.
2. Integrate career readiness into every classroom, e.g., all students are provided with job-based learning before graduation.
3. Develop academic and career planning honoring all postsecondary routes, including careers in construction, especially registered apprenticeship, e.g., allowing for dual enrollment for registered apprenticeship related instruction.

We are excited about these sensible policies and look forward to partnering with many different organizations to get them implemented.

Acknowledging the value that hands-on careers provide all of us should be a public priority. These common-sense policies ABC of Wisconsin is proposing would go a long way toward accomplishing this.

For more details on the policies, visit, [abcwi.org/careers-agenda](http://abcwi.org/careers-agenda).

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*Established in 1950, Associated Builders and Contractors is a national construction industry trade association that represents more than 21,000 members. Founded on the merit shop philosophy, ABC and its 69 chapters help members develop people, win work and deliver that work safely, ethically and profitably for the betterment of the communities in which ABC and its members work. The Wisconsin Chapter, based out of Madison, is the largest in the country with more than 900 members. Learn more at [abcwi.org](http://abcwi.org)*