

THE VANCOUVER SUN

The province's labour daze: Secondary schools can help train needed trades workers

Vancouver Sun
Thursday, September 4, 2003
Page: A9
Section: Editorial
Byline: Geoff Johnson
Column: Geoff Johnson
Source: Special to the Sun

When the building boom for the 2010 Winter Olympics starts, where will the skilled trades people come from? Probably not from B.C. where there is already a shortage of skilled trades people. Not from B.C. apprenticeship programs or B.C. secondary school pre-apprenticeship programs either.

As Michael Geoghegan, CEO of the B.C. Construction Association, wrote recently: "In this country we have decided that it is much better to burden our children with tens of thousands of dollars debt and a university degree of dubious value than to see them prosper as skilled trades people."

Here's the apparent anomaly. The province is currently awash, as one example, with young, enthusiastic, newly trained but unemployed teachers. In fact, universities across B.C. are producing newly unemployed and unemployable graduates in a variety of areas at a breathtaking rate.

Young BAs, B.Comms, B.Sc.s and B.Eds are meeting and greeting you at every restaurant and coffee shop as if a three- or four-year undergraduate degree is the new requirement for a minimum wage.

Yet trying to find a plumber, electrician, carpenter or auto mechanic when you need one is like trying to find your golf ball in the rough at the British Open. Even now, before the Olympic boom.

Each year, approximately 50,000 students graduate from secondary schools across B.C. But, according to industry training authorities along with employer and union representatives, there are too few of these graduates finding their way into the trades.

According to industry trainers, even with 50,000 high school grads each year, there are still only 2,469 electrical apprentices (the number one "highest opportunity" trade) in B.C. Following that are 1,821 carpentry apprentices, 1,468 automotive tech, 1,024 chef training and 912 plumbing apprentices working their way into the trades. And those numbers are the product of several years.

In fact, there are only about 16,000 apprentices (of whom just 50 per cent will complete the course) training right now. That might sound like a lot until you consider that more than 250,000 kids have graduated in the last five years. So maybe 6.4 per cent of secondary grads went into the trades over that five-year period.

Part of the problem is a combination of parental aspiration on behalf of children and the subsequent decline in interest in secondary schools trades courses.

If asked about their children's post-secondary futures, a significant number of parents -- as Geoghegan implied -- will talk about "getting into a good university." Students are, subsequently, encouraged to



Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun
When the taps leak, you'll need a plumber, not a PhD grad, Geoff Johnson says.

focus on those academic subjects which, faint hope, will realize this parental ambition. Practical arts courses leading to trades are seen as less than desirable, third rate and for other people's kids.

Yet while those freshly gowned university graduates struggle to survive at \$8-to-\$10 per hour, a newly ticketed plumber can start at about \$40,000 a year and work his/her business up to \$100,000 per annum.

In reality, only between 12 per cent and 15 per cent of high school grads will ever enter a university, leaving some 42,000 kids standing around looking for something else to do each year. You've probably noticed some of them.

This year, in January and February business, labour and industry representatives engaged in a series of forums and provided written submissions now set out in a discussion paper A New Model for Industry Training in British Columbia. It makes fascinating reading whether you're a parent, a student, a teacher or educational administrator. It's at www.aved.gov.bc.ca/industrytraining.

The report emphasizes that apprentice and trades training should start in secondary school. While the current secondary school apprenticeship program is working, there should be more promotion of the opportunities provided through this program.

The secondary school system does not seem to value a career in trades and employers are not always willing to commit to long-term training for employees.

B.C. is facing an opportunities shortage, not a skills shortage. In fact, many students and their parents seem unaware of the opportunities provided by the secondary school apprenticeship program.

Students in the program get paid while they are learning skills and gaining high school credits. Those who complete 480 hours of paid work experience in a trade area, maintain a C-plus average, graduate and continue in their apprenticeship are eligible to receive a \$1,000 scholarship.

Some school districts are already ahead of the curve. Maple Ridge school district is designing and developing a brand new "technical" secondary school. Others, however, still cling to academic success as the primary criterion for educational success.

Of course, pre-apprenticeship programs will only gain ground if apprenticeships become available.

That, in turn, depends on employers and government looking to the future and stepping up to create apprenticeship opportunities. It's one area where government might do well to provide more incentive for employers.

It's food for thought if B.C.'s current crop of secondary school students is to be given the chance to be part of the solution to B.C.'s present and future skills shortage.

Geoff Johnson, of Mill Bay, is a retired superintendent of schools.

gjohnson4@shaw.ca