

Trades advocates gaining ground in education space

Posted on Wednesday, Nov 2, 2022

Advocates for the trades are gaining ground in the education space, according to the head of the Construction Business Group.

Speaking yesterday at a Competitive Wisconsin event at Blackhawk Technical College in Janesville, Robb Kahl noted many plumbers, operating engineers, electricians and others in the trades have six-figure salaries with no student loan debt.

He said that's always been an attractive proposition when compared to a college education, but parents, teachers and guidance counselors have historically pushed most students toward college. Now, he said those same parents and advisors "are actually seeing that we present a really good opportunity" for students in Wisconsin.

"We're not shy now about getting into the high schools ... every state, building trades — so you go to Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan — has the same urgency," he said. "We're not going to entice kids to come over the border from Minnesota or Iowa because their building trades, their contractors are trying to keep them in desperately."

Tracy Pierner, president of the Blackhawk Technical College, praised these recruitment efforts. He underlined the importance of "getting that information to parents and to teachers and to kids at an earlier and earlier age," about career opportunities that align with the state's workforce needs.

"Bottom line is, how do we do a better job of matching opportunities that are available in our workforce to the folks that we have available?" he said.

Rick Sense, vice president of development and government affairs for the Greater Green Bay Chamber of Commerce, agreed more people are seeing the trades as a good option. He called on higher education leaders in the state to consider guiding college students away from "majors that aren't really going to be helpful in the

long-term economic growth of our state.”

And due to the demographic problem of the state’s aging workforce, Sense said Wisconsin needs to “do a better job” of creating opportunities for young workers to keep them from leaving the state.

Department of Workforce Development Chief Economist Dennis Winters highlighted Wisconsin’s challenges with attracting these workers, noting the state is “in a world of hurt” when it comes to demographic trends.

To help address this issue, he said Wisconsin needs to get more high-skilled workers and those with investment capital to move to the state, so “we can increase, essentially, the financial well-being that we have in the state and quality of life all around.”

Kahl also pointed to high-speed broadband internet as “an essential part” of the state’s talent pipeline, particularly for rural areas of the state. He noted local government officials understand this need and have been actively applying for federal funding to expand broadband.

“I think that’s only going to help expand and grow our transportation infrastructure,” he said. “The more people you have that are willing to move to a part of the state that they wouldn’t have thought of before, increases the need for other infrastructure, increases the opportunities for businesses, increases the opportunities for economic growth.”

Listen to an earlier WisBusiness.com podcast with Kahl:

<https://www.wisbusiness.com/2021/wisbusiness-the-podcast-with-robb-kahl-executive-director-of-wisconsin-infrastructure-investment-now/>

-By Alex Moe