

Signing Up **Students for the Trades**

On Wednesday, May 8, nearly 3,000 high school seniors from 300 high schools across the country signed a letter of intent to accept a position, begin an apprenticeship, or announce their decision to pursue a career in the skilled trades. SkillsUSA's National Signing Day, attended by teachers, elected officials, families, and friends, was a celebration of the decisions made by students to work in the fields of building trades and renovation, residential wiring, HVAC, or plumbing.

The inaugural event was modeled after those for high school student athletes to announce where they're pledging to play at the college level, or for graduating students to indicate which college they will be attending. SkillsUSA and sponsor Klein Tools teamed up to offer students going into the trades an occasion to commemorate their career decisions, as well as an opportunity to raise general awareness of the possibilities of careers in the skilled trades.

"Signing Day was a big moment in my life," says San Francisco 49ers quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo, a spokesperson for the event. "It solidified my decision to attend college and play football, putting me on course to where I am today in my NFL career. The students we are celebrating today are making that same kind of commitment." Jimmy's father, Tony, a career electrician and also a spokesperson, added, "After 40 years as an electrician, I've seen how the industry has changed and know that it's more important than ever for us to encourage young people to explore a career in the skilled trades."

The Texas Association of Builders (TAB) agrees with Tony Garoppolo's assessment and is developing programs geared toward trying to get high school students interested and on board. The group believes that, in many cases, students just out of school, who do not have the responsibilities of families, mortgages, and debt, will find it easier to accept the entry-level positions that are going unfilled in ever-greater numbers.

Ron Rohrbacher, VP of construction training at Houston-based Perry Homes, shared some of

the association's ideas for recruiting future construction labor from this group. Knowing that the military has been sending recruiters to high schools for years with some success, the 27 local Texas HBAs have been asked by TAB to each name a builder advocate from their membership who will visit local high schools and vocational schools and speak to the students about careers in the trades. The TAB website has created a Workforce Development section that offers downloadable PowerPoint presentations and videos for the advocates to include in their programs for the students along with talking points.

The association also has plans to partner in job fairs with schools that have technical education programs. San Antonio, for example, has been holding such fairs for the past five years. Last year, it drew more than 1,000 students to an event that featured a building competition as well as booths for local construction companies and vendors that can provide contacts for future job opportunities. Many local HBAs already put on Builder or Home Shows in their areas; including a job fair at these events for students wouldn't require much additional cost or effort.

Finally, the association would like to help those looking for workers and those looking for work to connect with one another more easily. TAB proposes that local HBAs provide a Workforce Development section on their websites that includes a help- and employment-wanted area where trades in need of labor can post open positions and those looking for work can find contact info for companies that are hiring.

These efforts are just a start, but one that holds great promise. If local associations across the country did something similar, it could make a huge difference.

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