



Pelican Chapter

Statement for the Record for Associated Builders and Contractors Pelican Chapter

Testimony of
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Before the
House Committee on Education & the Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary
Education

On
“Preparing Today's Students for Tomorrow's Jobs: A Discussion
on Career and Technical Education and Training Programs”

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The Voice of the Merit Shop®

Chairman Rokita, Congressman Grijalva, and members of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education:

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on “Preparing Today's Students for Tomorrow's Jobs: A Discussion on Career and Technical Education and Training Programs.”

My name is Alvin Bargas. I serve as the president of Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) Pelican Chapter located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. ABC is a national nonprofit trade association representing 22,000 members from more than 19,000 construction and industry-related firms. Founded on the merit shop philosophy, ABC and its 72 chapters help members develop people, win work and deliver that work safely, ethically, profitably and for the betterment of the communities in which ABC and its members work. The Pelican Chapter has a total membership of 438 companies.

The Pelican Chapter’s volunteer leaders are committed to training a safe, highly skilled construction workforce. Education and training will always be a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee. With nationally accredited curricula developed for the construction industry, the Pelican Chapter is training hundreds of men and women in industry-related specialties to meet and exceed the most exacting standards in the country. With the clout and knowledge provided by some of the most qualified instructors in the U.S., ABC trained workers tend to receive higher wages and experience more job satisfaction and greater job retention.

The Pelican Chapter offers construction craft education programs at its Baton Rouge and Lake Charles training centers. Currently, the training centers have a combined enrollment of more than 1,900 high school and adult students. Since 1983, ABC Pelican Chapter member contractors and industry-related partners have privately funded more than \$43,000,000 in training costs.

Further, ABC has developed partnership agreements with 43 high schools in 17 school districts. This partnership includes 76 classes with more than 1,100 students per year in high-demand trades such as welding, electrical, carpentry and pipefitting. The Pelican Chapter also engages high school students through craft competitions, tuition-free summer training courses, career counseling and a three-day Build Your Future event that reaches more than 900 students. These

achievements would not exist without the committed support of the construction industry. In addition to funding, ABC members alone donate more than \$50,000 per year in materials and equipment. More importantly, our members volunteer 1,600 hours per year in classrooms and when students graduate from school, ABC contractors put them to work.

In the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Louisiana faced a major challenge of recruiting and training a skilled workforce to rebuild the state. In response, ABC brought together construction industry and education stakeholders, including Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS), Louisiana Department of Education, organized labor, Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC), Board of Supervisors of Higher Education, as well as industry groups such as the Greater Baton Rouge Industry Alliance, New Orleans Business Roundtable and the Southwest Louisiana Construction Users Council—all of which represent Louisiana’s vital refining and petrochemical end users. With ABC’s leadership, the coalition’s mission was to create a strategy to recruit, train, and retain a safe, skilled and productive construction workforce. This strategy was published in “Recommendations for Confronting the Skilled Construction Workforce Shortage in Louisiana” in October 2006.

Louisiana’s construction industry now faces another workforce challenge due to new technologies in the extraction of natural gas and a renaissance in oil refining and chemical production. Project announcements in excess of \$60 billion in new construction, plus the expansion of existing facilities is driving the need for skilled workers. The LWC is predicting 35,000 new workers over the next four to five years may be necessary. This challenge will be exacerbated by our aging workforce—an estimated 17 percent of current construction workers nationwide will retire in the next decade. Retirements coupled with career changes, promotions to management, business formations, etc. will drive demand in Louisiana for an additional 51,300 workers, assuming an attrition rate of only 10 percent.

Even with an exploding demand for a skilled construction workforce, most secondary school systems are not structured to deliver a high level of technical education. Public high schools almost exclusively focus on the four-year college prep curriculum for all students. While this pathway is important, students should be offered opportunities to learn skills that prepare them for the many high paying, in-demand careers that do not require a bachelor’s degree. That said, the expansion of Career and Technical Education (CTE) options should never come at the

expense of academic rigor or quality instruction and must clearly align with industry workforce needs and post-secondary credentials. Louisiana must prepare its young people for success in the classroom and in the workplace.

In Louisiana, ABC and its partners are once again leading the charge to make our education system more closely aligned with future workforce demands. In collaboration with construction industry and education stakeholders and organized labor, a Craft Workforce Development Taskforce (Taskforce) was established. This broad-based Taskforce has created a strategic roadmap titled “Building Louisiana’s Craft Workforce.”

I am pleased to report that we are already making progress in this effort. In a major step forward, the Taskforce has ensured that an industry recognized and academically rigorous construction CTE curriculum will be consistently delivered across Louisiana’s training providers. In an effort to bring consistency and transferability to the curriculum that training providers use in the classrooms and labs, the LCTCS and the Louisiana Department of Education have adopted the curriculum of the NCCER, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) education foundation. This curriculum blends classroom instruction with hands-on training that articulates to post-secondary credential and community college programs.

Aligning industry-recognized curriculum with community and technical colleges, high schools, and ABC allows students and instructors to easily transition from one provider to another depending on personal needs and capacity requirements.

With facilities statewide in strategic locations, the LCTCS serves as the lead training partner. Training providers are focused on leveraging capacity at high schools as well as leveraging assets such as facilities and funding with private providers, which includes ABC and the AFL-CIO. Training schedules have been amended to accommodate varying demand, such as compressed schedules for industry based certifications (NCCER and American Welding Society) and evening and weekend class alternatives.

Training providers are also sharing a pool of instructors that can be deployed to various locations based on need. Web enhancements are being completed by the LCTCS and LWC.

The Louisiana state government also is enacting innovative education reforms that will provide better opportunities for students to access CTE. Louisiana's Governor and state legislators collaborated with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to create Course Choice, which gives high school students the option to choose from a diverse range of courses—including core academics, college preparation and career training—that are offered by a range of providers.

Through Course Choice, students can customize their learning path to prepare for higher education and careers. The program offers them opportunities to gain industry-based certifications, in addition to earning high school and college credit. Course Choice is an innovative approach to provide all Louisiana students equal access to not only career training, but a head-start on a postsecondary credential and ultimately a career.

ABC believes that innovative reforms like Course Choice can serve as a catalyst to recruit and train capable young people to either step into a higher-wage construction job based on their skills or continue on to complete the post-secondary courses they need to advance in their careers. To achieve this, Course Choice provides that students, parents and school counselors collaborate to make sure students register in courses that are appropriate for their age, interests and capabilities. From approximately 100 applicants, the BESE and the Department of Education selected 21 course providers, including the Pelican Chapter and LCTCS, which reach more than 3,000 Louisiana students. As of August 2013, ABC is offering electrical, pipefitting and welding Course Choice programs and has about 34 students enrolled.

Building America's construction workforce to meet demand is going to require new and innovative ideas, as well as cooperative partnerships among stakeholders from a myriad of public agencies and private entities.

The challenge ahead is to focus our current resources to support CTE programs for in-demand industries that provide students with innovative and flexible training options that stretch from high school to advanced postsecondary credentials. This effort includes promoting new and existing partnerships between industries, government, and education providers while establishing clear accountability indicators and easily understood measures of success.

There is a renaissance in the foundations on which Louisiana delivers career and technical education. It is a renaissance that will touch thousands of Louisiana youth, not to mention underemployed and unemployed adults. We are on the cusp of doing our part to rebuild America's middle class by putting people to work in high paying careers in construction.

On behalf of Associated Builders and Contractors Pelican Chapter, I'd like to thank the subcommittee for holding today's hearing on this important subject. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my formal remarks. I am prepared to answer any questions you and the other members of the subcommittee may have.