



April 9, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and
Pensions
United States Senate
Washington DC 20510

Dear Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr:

On behalf of Associated Builders and Contractors, a national trade association with 69 chapters representing more than 21,000 members, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on critical workforce development issues facing the construction industry and provide feedback to the committee.

ABC Is a Leader in Construction Craft, Safety, and Leadership Education

ABC chapters and members utilize industry-tested and -recognized craft training programs and registered apprenticeship models to deliver construction education through 800 ABC education programs at 1,400 locations nationwide. These include innovative, flexible earn-while-you-learn models and industry-recognized apprenticeships in more than 50 professions—plus more than 300 U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeship programs across 20 different occupations.

In 2019, ABC and its members [invested \\$1.5 billion](#) to educate and upskill more than 1.1 million course attendees in craft, leadership and safety education to advance their careers in commercial and industrial construction. Safety education accounted for nearly half of the total workforce investment, averaging \$1,147 per employee annually.

ABC's commitment to creating a safe, skilled and productive workforce is evident from the practices contractor members have in place, from the utilization of both government-registered and industry-recognized apprenticeship programs to a world-class safety management system, [ABC's STEP Safety Management System](#). Founded in 1989 as a safety benchmarking and improvement tool, the STEP Safety Management System dramatically improves safety performance among participants regardless of company size or type of work. Participating ABC member firms measure their safety processes and policies on 25 key components through a detailed questionnaire with the goal of implementing or enhancing safety programs that reduce jobsite incidents.

[ABC's Safety Performance Report](#) is an annual assessment that furthers the construction industry's understanding of how to achieve world-class safety through its STEP Safety Management System. The 2021 report documents the dramatic impact of using proactive safety practices to reduce recordable incidents by up to 85%, making the best-performing companies 655% safer than the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics industry average.

Ensuring the health and safety of the construction workforce in the workplace will continue to be a top priority as ABC members build America's hospitals, schools, manufacturing facilities, roads, bridges and power plants. But more must be done to help educate tomorrow's construction professionals.

The Construction Industry Is Central to America's Economic Recovery and Requires an All-of-the-Above Workforce Development Strategy

ABC believes the federal government should commit to supporting and defending an all-of-the-above approach for skill development where construction workers and employers have the freedom to select workforce development strategies that maximize innovation and achieve world-class safety and productivity gains. These training methodologies include just-in-time task training, competency-based learning, e-learning, work-based learning and industry-recognized and government-registered apprenticeships that will allow for expanded access to industry credentials, work-based learning opportunities, career exploration and post-secondary skills training. These are approaches to educating construction craft professionals that can address the industry's labor shortage and skills gap, but these solutions are difficult to achieve when government limits competition to firms that train their workforce using a specific program or methodology.

[An ABC analysis of BLS data](#) shows that construction companies will need to hire 430,000 more workers in 2021 than they employed in 2020—evidence that the industry is powering America's recovery. As the analysis also revealed that every \$1 billion in extra construction spending generates an average of at least 5,700 construction jobs, any significant infrastructure investments will increase worker demand in the industry. Therefore, lawmakers must avoid restrictive policies that would limit the pipeline of skilled workers entering the industry as doing so would hinder the construction industry's ability to serve as an economic engine during America's efforts to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Likewise, President Biden's American Jobs Plan calls for a \$100 billion investment in workforce development targeting newly dislocated workers and vulnerable populations with an emphasis on registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs as well as new investments and partnerships with community colleges to deliver job training. ABC believes that this funding must also focus on an all-of-the-above workforce development strategy, including the aforementioned training methodologies. We urge the committee to incorporate this approach into its legislative initiatives.

Apprenticeship Expansion Requires Meaningful Reforms

While the Biden administration has also endorsed the House-passed and [ABC-opposed](#) National Apprenticeship Act of 2021, we urge the Senate to work in bipartisan fashion to truly expand apprenticeship opportunities for more hardworking Americans. ABC believes that the NAA would not achieve its goal of expanding apprenticeship opportunities as it would further restrict small businesses' ability to access federally registered apprenticeship programs, limit job opportunities in the construction industry and create additional obstacles to meet future workforce demand and needs. In 2018, ABC member and MAREK Chief Operating Officer Mike Holland [testified before the Senate HELP Committee](#) and highlighted the important benefits of industry programs to promote flexibility and expand apprenticeship opportunities in construction. ABC encourages the committee to revisit this hearing and the additional suggestions made to address deficiencies in the registered apprenticeship system.

Modernizing Existing Policy Tools Will Support Workforce Development

ABC supports bipartisan efforts to expand Pell Grants and 529 education savings plans, as doing so would provide critical tools for delivering workforce development opportunities for all Americans. The passage of the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(PL 113-128\)](#), signed into law on July 22, 2014, created a new statutory definition for “recognized postsecondary credentials” that encompasses the full spectrum of degrees, certifications and credentials available to students beyond a high school diploma—all currently recognized by the employer community. However, the federal government has failed to expand these critical funding pathways for all recognized postsecondary credentials, despite bipartisan support to do so by Congress.

In the 117th Congress, a bipartisan and bicameral group of lawmakers, led by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Sen. Mike Braun (R-Ind), Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-Va.), Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), Rep. Dean Phillips (D-Minn.) and Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.) introduced the [Freedom to Invest in Tomorrow’s Workforce Act](#) to expand 529 plans for all recognized postsecondary credentials as defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Additionally, Sens. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) and Tim Kaine (D-Va.) introduced the [Jumpstarting Our Businesses by Supporting Students Act](#), which would expand Pell Grant eligibility to cover high-quality and rigorous short-term job training programs.

Conclusion

A national workforce development plan is a generational opportunity to change the paradigm of how our nation builds the construction workforce and promotes construction as a rewarding career path in our schools and communities. ABC appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the important policies behind workforce development programs in the construction industry and looks forward to continuing to work with the committee on these efforts.

Sincerely,



Kristen Swearingen
Vice President, Legislative & Political Affairs