

BY SUE BURNET

Standing on the Front Line

At the SkillsUSA competition (which we wrote about in August), we met Zach Fields, who co-presented a seminar called “Exploring the Impacts of Effective Industry & Education Collaboration.” Zach had recently been hired as the Director of School Relations with The Construction Education Foundation of Georgia (CEFGA), a position he says is like standing on the front lines of skills education in our industry.

A MODEL TRAINING PROGRAM

CEFGA is a non-profit with more than 70 accredited training and education facilities throughout the state of Georgia. More than 7,000 high-school students receive training each year in their programs. In addition, CEFGA holds a large job fair for the industry each year called the “World of Construction.” In 2015, more than 7,000 people attended this event, which features interactive displays and industry reps and is centered around Georgia’s SkillsUSA Championship.

With more than 20 years of combined experience in teaching and construction, Fields currently works with about 150 programs in the organization’s training and education facilities. One of his primary responsibilities is to support instructors that are involved with the state’s high-school trade programs. He also acts as a liaison between the students in the programs and the building industry. He said that his primary goal is “trying to transform and elevate technical education in Georgia.” It’s an uphill battle, but Zach is determined

and said: “Once someone breaks through and starts an initiative, it’s much easier for others to follow.”

HOW CAN WE HELP?

Asked how the everyday contractor can make a difference, Fields responded that the way we can have the biggest impact is to form partnerships with the teachers in the industrial arts programs at schools in our respective areas. Getting involved is the crucial first step. Most contractors are experiencing an upswell of work with the improving economy, so taking the time to get involved can be difficult. But as Fields said, “This industry is all about people who solve problems and who get things done on a daily basis. And that’s precisely what we need to do with the education of our youth.”

Some of his suggestions for contractors are to work as an assistant to teachers when they need extra hands and eyes to handle a large group of kids; be a guest speaker or teacher for a specific area of expertise; or connect the schools with suppliers to help out with materials and tool needs. Another way for a contractor to help out is to become a member of a school’s advisory board for trade programs.

One of the biggest challenges that the construction industry faces is the image and perception of construction-related jobs. Contractors can help by going to job fairs and career days and speaking to students, parents, and counselors to dispel the myths about jobs in the construction industry.

In many ways, Georgia may be ahead of other states on these issues, but hopefully CEFGA is a microcosm of what the industry is seeing all around the country. Fields summed it up: “Partnership is key; we just need to get out there and start, and get involved on the front lines.” He believes that begins in the nation’s schools.

Many folks reading this column find themselves on these front lines of education in our industry, and *JLC* would like to talk to more of you. We want to hear your suggestions about other programs or initiatives that you have seen or are involved with that have been effective in your area. By creating this dialogue, we hope to continue to move the needle on education.

Sue Burnet and her husband, Greg, own Toolbelt Productions (toolbeltproductions.com).

Contractors need to form partnerships with teachers to help improve trade education.



Photo: Zach Fields