

# The case for developing skilled worker talent, starting in high school



Harbor Freight Tools for Schools' study, the first comprehensive look at skilled trades education in American public high schools, paints a clear picture of an education system not yet meeting the needs of American students or of our country's economy and infrastructure — and **students, parents, and voters want it fixed.**

The two studies, by NORC at the University of Chicago and JFF, showed there are far too few students across the country enrolling in trades courses in high school. In fact, **there is no skilled trades field where current enrollment in high school programs is projected to meet even half of employer demand over the next decade.** This is further complicated by a looming teacher shortage.

While a recession resulting from COVID-19 may reduce that demand in the near term, given these sizable gaps, and the fact that much demand is driven by retirements, the need is still likely to outpace the availability of trades professionals. As schools face a challenging economic future and potential budget cuts, it is important to remember how valuable skilled trades courses are for students, families, communities, and our country.

## Combating Negative Perceptions

Opinion research shows that Americans see the trades as vital, and are interested in high school trades courses, but don't fully understand the effectiveness of high school trades courses or the paths they offer to fulfilling and essential work with family-supporting pay.

Meanwhile, education systems are hampered by the long history of separating some students into a college-preparation pathway and others into a vocational pathway. This system led to students of color and students from low-income backgrounds being deliberately placed into "shop classes" that weren't seen as paths to success after high school.

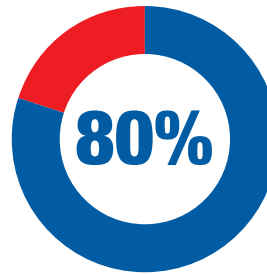


**Over the past decade, jobs in carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and advanced manufacturing have ranked among the top five hardest to fill.**

## Skills for College and Careers

The best trades programs incorporate project-based learning, hands-on problem solving, and teamwork, as well as real-world experiences, high-quality industry certifications, paid apprenticeships, and credits toward an associate degree.

In addition to certifications, skills, and workplace experience, a trades education also gives students an opportunity to work their way through college with a job that pays well — eliminating the need to take on significant college debt.



**80% of voters across the political spectrum described the skilled trades as "important," and 83% say the government should provide more funding for skilled trades classes.**

## Something America Can Agree On

Students and their parents see the value of trades education, which also enjoys remarkably strong bipartisan support. **In fact, the vast majority of parents — 89% — believe American students would be more prepared for success in a career if there were more opportunities to study the skilled trades.** And more than 7 in 10 students, parents, and voters say high schools could do a better job preparing students for life after graduation by giving them more chances to learn real-world skills.

Employers report a critical shortage of qualified workers. Students want to learn these skills, and their parents support them doing so. Voters across the spectrum are willing to pay for an increased investment in trades education, and say they will support candidates who make it a priority.

This is a rare moment of opportunity for alignment among educators, industry, policymakers, parents, and students to fulfill the promise that trades education offers.

**Let's fix this — together.**