
FRONTLINE WORKFORCE TRAINING AND CAREER PATHWAYS GAINING TRACTION

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The two most urgent workforce development priorities for the frontline workforce in transit (and transportation) are (1) developing a systematic approach to more and better training for the blue collar technical workforce and (2) creating broadly available career pathways linking education and industry for jobs that don't require a 4-year college degree. Major national attention has focused on both priorities recently.

Frontline Workforce Highlighted at DOT Workforce Summit

Training for the frontline work force figured prominently in at the Transportation Workforce Summit, held in Washington April 24-26. The event was organized by the Department of Transportation (DOT) through the Council of 20 DOT-funded University Transportation Centers (UTCs). Many speakers raised questions about workforce investment for transportation employees. A few highlights:

The opening industry panel featured heads of national transportation groups who strongly emphasized the training priorities of the frontline blue collar work force. John Horsley of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) observed that while University Transportation Centers are key to educating transportation's white collar and administrative staff, "What about the other 80 percent? It's the frontline workforce where we have our biggest skills challenges."

Ed Hamberger of the Association of American Railroads seconded Horsley's point ,emphasizing that railroading's most urgent challenge is finding qualified electricians, in particular skilled signals technicians.

Ed Wytkind, President of the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department and a Center Board leader, pointed out that the US transit industry is spending less than 1 percent of payroll on training, compared with over 8 percent for the Paris Metro system. He specifically mentioned that very successful training systems have been developed for frontline workers.

Secretary Ray LaHood keynoted the conference with a call for stronger connections between transportation and education. LaHood explained that he was a middle school teacher before he was elected to Congress in 1995., and he was personally involved in mentoring elementary school students in Capitol Hill neighborhood schools. He has championed DOT employees mentoring school children and has spearheaded DOT's new workforce coordination with the Departments of Education and Labor. The goal of building effective partnerships between transportation and education was prominent throughout the conference.

These themes were further amplified by TLC staff at the conference: **Deputy Director Jack Clark**, **Program Director for Workforce Education Patricia Greenfield**, and **Center Director Brian Turner** participated as panelists and presenters at the conference.

Career Pathways – A Win for America’s Students, Communities and Industries

In recent decades, America has had a shortage of effective educational opportunities for young people not headed straight to four-year colleges. The high school dropout rate for teenagers not headed straight to college is nearly 50 percent nationally, and much worse in inner cities and rural poverty areas. Many US industries, including public transportation, say they can’t find qualified applicants, especially young applicants, for entry-level blue collar technical jobs.

The idea of building systematic links between industrial careers and high schools (and even middle and elementary schools) has grown in recent years to address this fundamental mismatch. A new report in Time magazine, “[Learning that Works](#)”, points out that these new career and technical education programs don’t just provide young people with “career awareness”: they provide “an alternative way to teach them math, science and reading. They love it.” What we used to call “vocational education”, recast in the 1990s as Career and Technical Education (CTE) is now in the midst of a renewal that emphasizes closer ties with industry partners from business and labor. Robert Schwartz at Harvard has led research summarized last year in [Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenges of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century](#).

This April the US Department of Education, after extensive consultation with industry partners, produced their [Blueprint for Transforming Career and Technical Education](#).

These important proposals provide a foundation for broader education reform, looking to prepare learners equally for careers and college – rather than relegating those students not headed directly to college to the status of afterthoughts.

These innovations in education for the “forgotten half” of American young people provide great opportunities for the public transportation industry, its stakeholders and communities. A central principle in the Education Department's Blueprint is that education can build its learning around industry-recognized training standards. After many years of work, transit has detailed standards for training in five key maintenance occupations. The Transportation Learning Center is partnering with transit agencies and unions in important locations to expand and link together successful local programs to link young people from communities served by transit with quality education and career opportunities in transportation. The transit industry could greatly benefit from these programs, as can the communities served by public transportation.