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MICHIGAN MERIT

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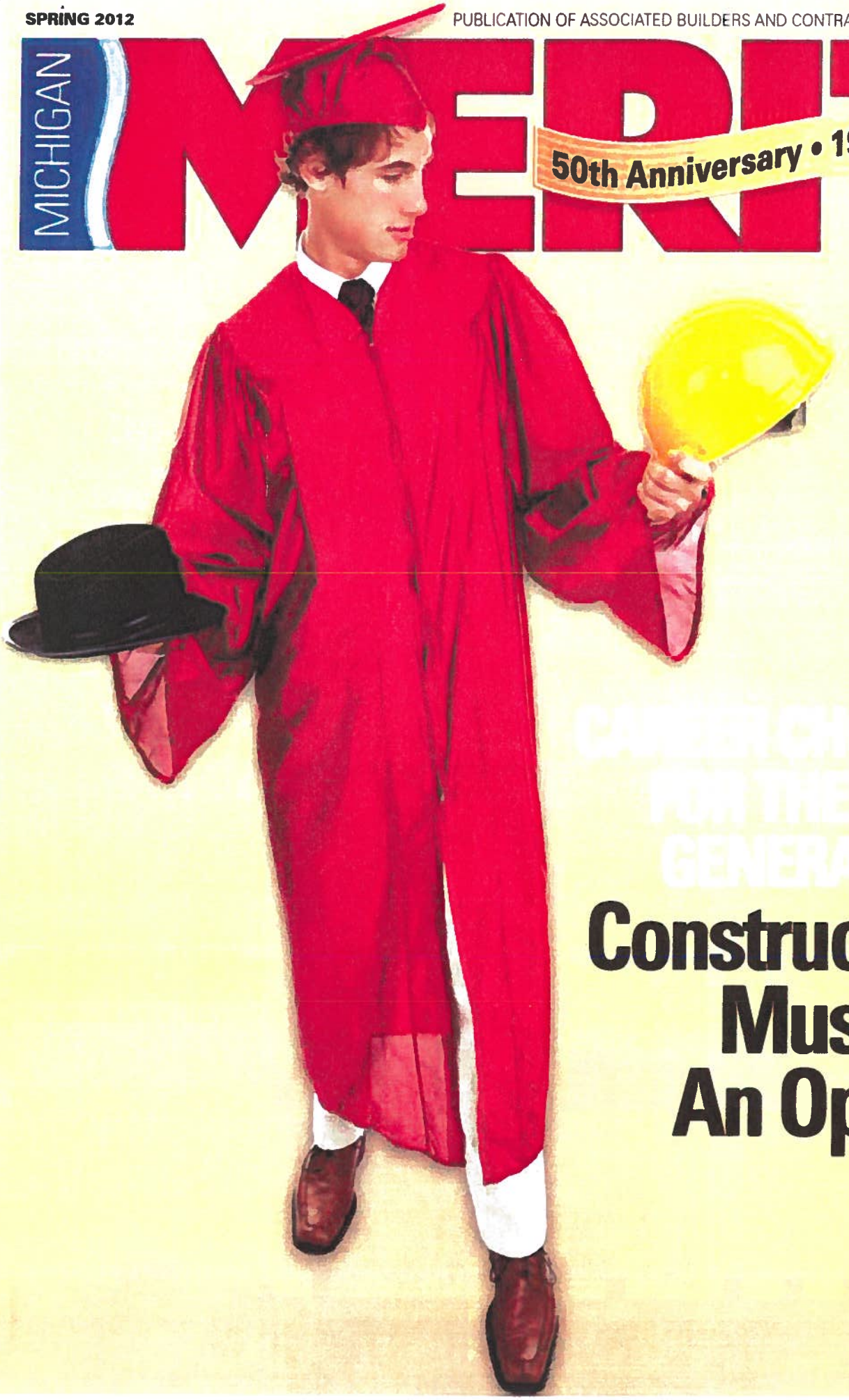

CAREER CHOICES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION:

Construction Must Be An Option

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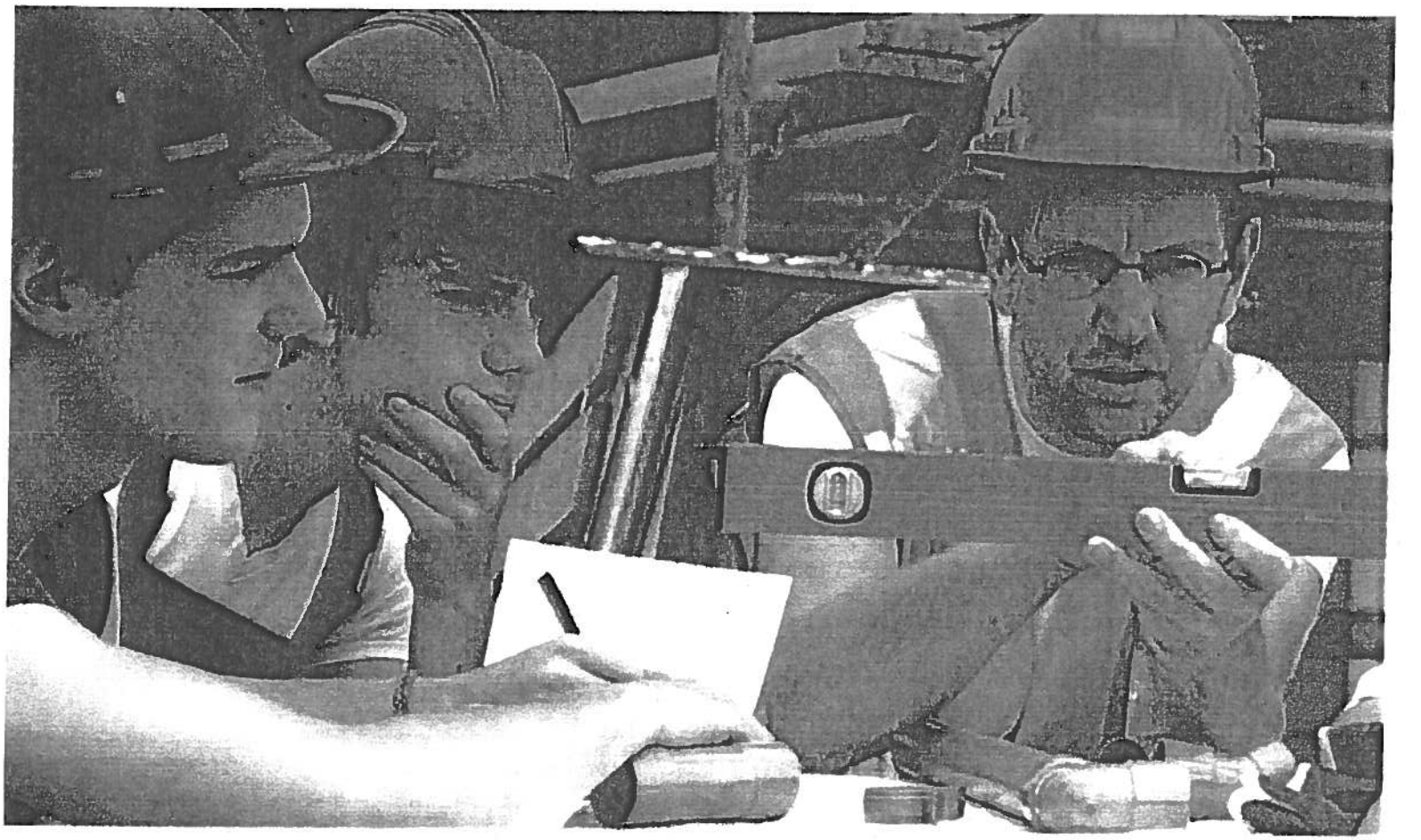
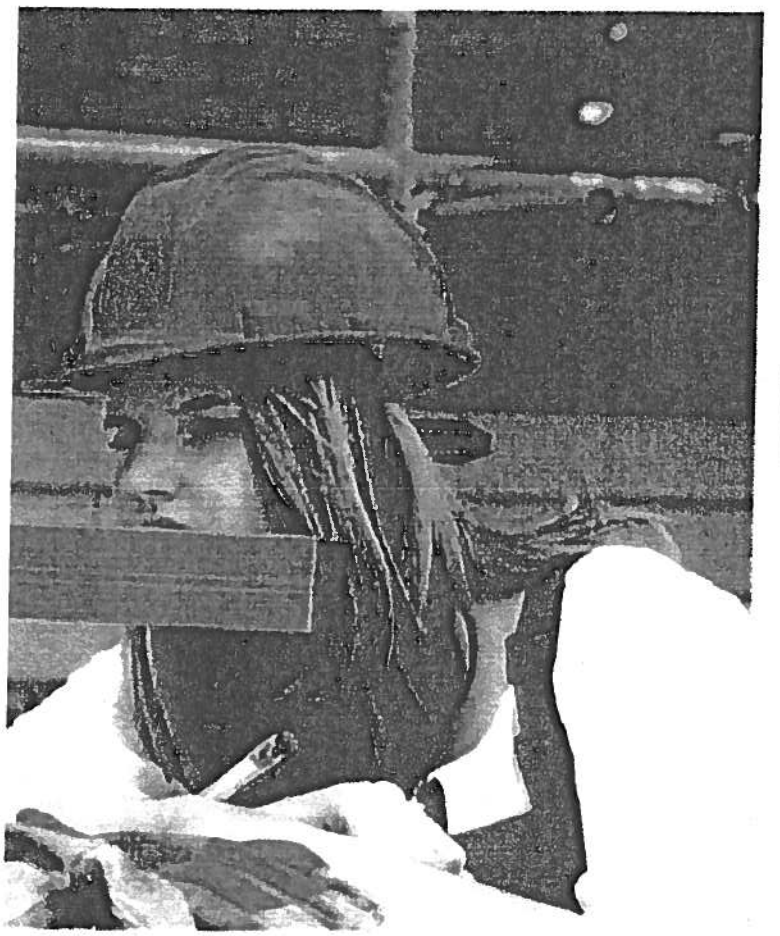


CONSTRUCTION MUST BE AN OPTION

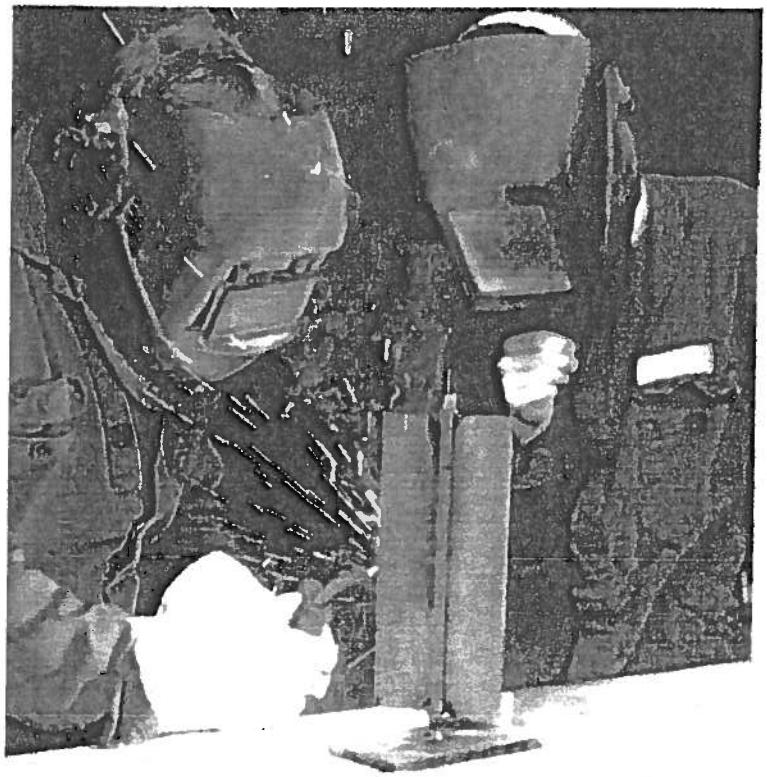


Craftsman. For centuries, the word has inspired respect and allowed those who endeavored to become skilled at their chosen trades to earn a comfortable income well beyond those of their uneducated peers. Even today, we speak of excellent craftsmanship with a sense of pride and even awe.

Those who are in the construction trades are craft professionals in the truest sense of the word, requiring high-level skills and a dedication to detail and quality. And yet fewer and fewer young people are entering into construction trades. According to the 2011 Manpower Group Talent Shortage Survey of 40,000 employers worldwide, skilled trades positions posed the third biggest challenge in finding qualified workers globally, but poses the greatest challenge here in the United States. And the challenges of finding skilled employees are expected to increase over the next eight years.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of carpenters is projected to grow 20% by 2020. Employment of plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters is expected to grow 26% during that period, and of electricians, 23%. The need for heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers is expected to grow a whopping 34%. These growth figures are well beyond the average expected growth for all occupations.

According to Chris Fisher, President and CEO of ABC of Michigan, the shortage of skilled tradesmen is not just a future concern, but one employers are facing today. "Many of our members are looking for skilled individuals and can't find them," he says. Carol Eberhardt, Education Director for ABC's Southeastern Michigan Chapter, agrees. "Many skilled tradespeople have either retired or left the state due to the economic downturn. As our economy is ramping up a little, there's a shortage."



So what's keeping young people from entering the trades?

Many ABC of Michigan members believe that the change in Michigan's graduation requirements have negatively impacted students going into vocational education. "It has decimated our 'farm clubs' by eliminating vocational programs in the high schools," says Mark Sawyer, executive director of the ABC Southeastern Michigan Chapter.

The current Michigan high school graduation requirements, known as the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC), were established in 2006; they dramatically increased the math, science and English requirements students had to pass in order to graduate. Students must now complete 4 credits of math, including Geometry, and Algebra I and II; four credits of English; 3 in science, including one in biology and one in either physics or chemistry; and 3 in social studies. Beginning with the class of 2016, students will also have to complete 2 credits in a foreign language. These requirements were developed, according to state publications, "to ensure that Michigan's students have the skills and knowledge needed for the jobs of the 21st Century global economy."

But many ABC of Michigan members believe that the Michigan Merit Curriculum puts too much emphasis on 4-year college preparation tracks, while ignoring equally important, rigorous and demanding pathways. Many Michigan legislators agree.

Two Michigan representatives have introduced legislation to change the Michigan Merit Curriculum. Representative Ed McBroom (R-Vulcan) has introduced House Bill 5451, which would reduce state requirements for math from 4 to 2 and make the Algebra II requirement elective, reduce the social science and science credits to 2 each, health to .5, and completely eliminate the arts and foreign language requirements. Representative Joel Johnson (R-Clare) is proposing a measure with a more local focus. It would allow local districts working with parents to develop a vocational program that would meet local needs. It would be required to be at least one year in length and could replace all or some of the Algebra II, Science 3, English 4, Foreign Language II, and the arts and online learning requirements. Both legislators see their bills as a way to support career and technical education (CTE), which they see as a viable pathway for creating high-skill, high-demand, high-paid workers.

Even many educators agree that the current requirements need more flexibility. Jeff Bohl, Principal of the Ingham County Intermediate School District Career Center, says it's very difficult for students to reconcile graduation requirements with a two-year high school vocational program. "About 70% of a student's schedule is set, leaving little time for career and technical education programs," he says, "especially if a student fails one of the required classes and has to retake it."

ABC of Michigan strongly supports the position that there should be a dual path to getting a diploma. Both Sawyer and Eberhardt suggest that the state model its schools after Germany, where students sit down with their parents and counselors to determine whether to follow a college prep or vocational path. "One shouldn't be considered better than the other," says Sawyer. Corey Hannahs, owner of Hannahs Electric Company in Ann Arbor and Lansing, echoes the sentiment: "Everybody pushes college and that's not everyone's cup of tea."

The debate focuses primarily on the Algebra II requirement. "The requirement that every student complete Algebra II is putting a crimp in voc tech kids' program," says Bohl.

Michigan State Superintendent Mike Flanagan contends that, over the last couple years, the state has sought to build additional flexibility into state law to help students complete their Algebra II credit. It can now be replaced with statistics and/or data analysis, which he sees as very applicable to CTE programs. But many counter that greater flexibility is still needed and that the current graduation requirements must be changed. ACBMI is working toward that goal.

One thing every individual interviewed could agree on was that the MMC isn't the only factor contributing to fewer students entering the skilled trades. Vickie Markavitch, Superintendent of Oakland Schools, observes, "Some of our technical programs, including the construction program, are on the verge of closing due to low enrollment and have been, even before the MMC was put in place."

Recent research reveals that the skilled trades suffer from a poor image and a lack of exposure to what the trades can offer. A recent poll of 15 year-olds by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found only one in 10 American teenagers saw themselves in a blue-collar job at age 30. "Construction is seen as a dirty, hard-working industry by students today," says Sawyer. "It

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almost seems that going into the trades makes you less of a person," observes contractor Hannahs.

The recent economic downturn hasn't helped student perceptions of the trades as providing a secure economic future. But the fact is, when students learn a trade they have a skill for a lifetime, one that is transportable and profitable. For most of the trades, students will be making $40,000 or more by the time they finish their apprenticeships, equal to or exceeding many entry-level positions for 4-year degreed individuals. As individuals get more experience, there are opportunities to move up into management, even business ownership.

There's no denying that since the 1970s, students have been told that getting a bachelor's degree was the ticket to financial success, a trend that continues today. President Obama has said that he wants to produce the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020; at the same time, his administration has cut funding for vocational education by 20%.

Parents are also instrumental in steering their children away from the trades. "I've had parents literally yell at me for encouraging kids to pursue CTE pathways," says Superintendent Markavitch. "Parents and high school counselors consistently discourage students from going into the trades because of this mindset that kids have to have a 4-year degree to be successful." And the state superintendent agrees. "We have to make kids, parents and school guidance counselors aware that skilled trades and other career and technical education paths are viable alternatives for kids. I would be happy to work with ABC of Michigan to make this happen," says director Flanagan.

Also hampering enrollment in CTE is the misconception that the trades are a "dumping ground" for kids who aren't smart or can't make it in college. To the contrary, the trades often make learning core subjects like math and reading relevant, answering the "what's the point?" question high school students have been asking since days of the one-room schoolhouse. "All you have to do is go to a vocational program and see how excited and enthusiastic these students are," says Eberhardt.

It is clear that the debate over graduation requirements will continue, and reaching consensus on academic requirements will be a struggle. But rebuilding the image of the skilled trades and promoting vocational education to young people dazzled by the Internet seems to be something on which ABC of Michigan members, lawmakers and educators can agree. Recruiting more students into the skilled trades will benefit everybody – builders and contractors, the economy, and especially students. After all, as Mark Sawyer points out, there's more than money involved: "Nothing gives you a sense of personal satisfaction like passing by a building that you've been part of constructing." **MM**

Photos courtesy of the ABC Southeastern Michigan Chapter's Education Program

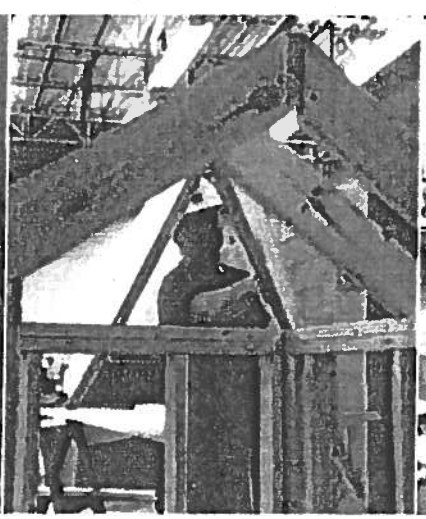
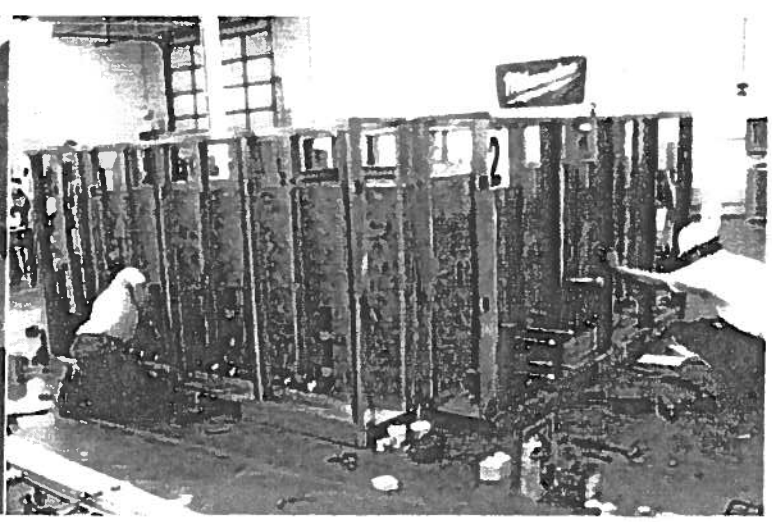
HOW ABC IS PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CRAFTSMEN

Helping Young People Explore the Trades

ABC offers a unique educational opportunity to expose young people to the skilled trades through a career exploration program. Through the Exploring the Trades program, ABC is reaching out to young people ages 16-24 to familiarize them with the various skilled trades to help them determine if one of these careers may be right for them. "Any school, manufacturer, or alternative education program can establish an Exploring program in their community," says Jimmy Greene, CEO of the Greater Michigan Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors. "Any ABC member can call our office and we'll work with them to set up the program." The program template offers one 2-hour program per month, October through May. Each session focuses on a different trade, giving students insights into the kind of work, wages, educational requirements, and types of positions available. Each session also includes a hands-on component so that students get a real-life experience with the trade. The template can be customized to suit the needs of the sponsoring company or organization.

The Exploring program informs young people of the career opportunities available, and encourages much-needed consideration of a career in the skilled trades. And that benefits us all.

Apprenticeship Training

ABC provides apprenticeship training throughout Michigan and across the United States. In fact, ABC has become the world leader in apprenticeship and craft training in the merit shop construction industry. All ABC apprenticeship programs are accredited through the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) and are registered with the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Apprenticeship. There are three ABC apprenticeship programs in Michigan, one in each chapter:

- **ABC Greater Michigan Chapter:** The ABC Construction Academy offers apprenticeship and craft training in 11 different trades including carpentry, electrical, HVAC, plumbing, pipefitting, millwright and masonry, among others, and is a State of Michigan proprietary school.
- **ABC Southeastern Chapter:** The Construction Education Trust has been instructing apprentices in the skilled trades for 20 years. Their apprenticeship program offers four years of intense and trades-specific training in the following crafts: Electrical, Carpentry, Plumbing, Sheet Metal and HVAC.
- **ABC West Michigan Chapter:** ABC/WMC offers apprenticeship training in cooperation with Grand Rapids Community College Tassell M-Tech Center. **MM**