

OP-ED: IP 65 is what Oregon's construction industry needs

By: [Mike Salsgiver](#) in [Buildings Bridges and Roads](#) May 17, 2016 12:17 pm



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In recent columns, I have written of the need to build the construction workforce of the future. One of the key steps in that effort is to lay the pipeline for the talent that will eventually move into our industry's companies.

For many Oregon students, high school has become a dead end. Oregon ranks 47th out of 50 states for high school graduation rates, and its students leave high school generally unprepared either to attend college or join the workforce; they lack the hands-on skills needed to be successful.

In the upcoming general election in November, Oregonians will have the opportunity to begin to fix that problem. If passed by the voters, Initiative Petition 65 will use proven strategies to build new career paths for our students.

IP 65 would not raise taxes and would not take money away from existing public programs. Instead, as the state economy grows, IP 65 would direct \$800 per high school student, per year, to pay for three proven programs:

- career technical education (CTE) classes for every public district in our state,
- early college credit programs and classes for every Oregon high schooler and
- drop-out prevention strategies for schools.

The crippling of the education pipeline for construction can be seen in many educational programs. For more than 40 years, Oregon has moved toward pushing students into a four-year

college model. For some industries, such as high tech, this was essential. But many students have no interest in going to a four-year school. They are more technically inclined, or they want to work with their hands.

During this time, the state has systematically disassembled vocational education programs. Wood, metal and car shops formerly were in almost every high school (and some middle schools), and today they are rare. Over the years and during the economic recession, more than 600 (50 percent) secondary CTE programs were eliminated in Oregon, reducing school districts' connections to their local and regional workforces and educational leaders.

Similarly, the correlation between Oregon's dropout rate and the decline in vocational/CTE education is almost impossible to ignore. With a nearly 50 percent reduction in CTE programs, Oregon saw its public high school graduation rate fall to fourth-lowest in the entire country. This is simply unacceptable.

These numbers demonstrate that a fundamental change is needed within public high schools to keep students motivated and interested. These are capable, intelligent young people, but they do not perform well within the traditional education environment. If left unaddressed, low graduation rates will continue to plague Oregon in its workforce and economy.

Over many legislative sessions, AGC has worked with other industry partners, legislators, administrators and two governors to increase funding for CTE. Although these efforts have successfully doubled the amount of CTE money (roughly \$20 million per biennium), there is still more to be done for the up-and-coming generations. For comparison's sake, Washington state alone invested \$411,675,936 from July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014 into CTE and apprenticeship programs. We are not keeping up with our neighbors to the north. And we are not doing what we must do to help our children succeed.

IP 65 will enable school districts to expand upon proven approaches for addressing the dropout crisis by opening new career doors and preparing students for success in college and their careers. IP 65 is also accountable. School districts will need to apply for the money, specify how they plan to spend it, and report results (regular performance audits will also be conducted so dollars are spent as intended). IP 65 will also be controlled locally so that schools can work with their communities to set up programs that match their students' needs.

As industry members and leaders in our communities, it is our duty to ensure that classes for construction trades and technologies, engineering, alternative fuel design, computer science, 3-D printing, welding, graphic arts, health care and others are available to all high school students should they choose to pursue those opportunities. We know that students can succeed in the hands-on environment of CTE classes. Successful and engaged students make highly skilled workers.

Fortunately, we are finding willing partners in many of Oregon's school districts. As bond measures for school maintenance, modernization and new construction are brought before the voters and are passed, we are seeing physical space to support vocational education classes and programs being rebuilt into our schools. Most notably, providing for CTE space and programs is

a common part of conversations in bond development committees, which are heavily guided by parents. They get it.

A major post-recession challenge faced by our companies continues to be finding and retaining the best talent – and talent is sorely needed. With so many boomers retiring from the trades (10,000 per day on average across the country), the U.S. is going to need many more pipefitters, nuclear power plant operators, carpenters, welders, utility workers – the list is long! If we can reach our future workforce in high school and channel the energy they have into development of a pipeline of highly skilled workers, the future of construction and other industries will be very bright.

Income stability and long-term career development are important to our kids. If Oregon is serious about improving graduation rates and providing for greater student success, CTE is the perfect means to that end. CTE is a win for the economy, a win for the industry and a win for the kids themselves.

For now, we applaud the IP 65 campaign team's work on this critical issue as a means to improve both the construction industry and Oregon's overall economic well-being. We hope the voters will see the wisdom in and the need to support this request in 2016.

Please vote YES on IP 65 in November.

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