

Real world skill-building needed in Oregon

Statewide initiative would deliver skills to students to replace Baby Boomers leaving workforce

By **LIZ HERRERA**
Guest commentary

I'll soon be saying "good-bye" to my family and friends, and my hometown, Hermiston. I graduated high school this year and in September and I'll start my next chapter when I go to George Fox University to study civil engineering and graphic arts.

This is super-exciting for me! Just a few years ago I had no idea what I would be doing after high school.

But thanks to vocational and career technical education offered to me during high school, I now have clear vision for myself! One three-year course changed the way I viewed my own abilities and my future.

Most Oregon students, however, never have this type of opportunity because vocational and career technical education haven't been prioritized statewide with adequate, stable funding.

That's why Initiative Petition 65, which will be on the November ballot, is so important for this state. To succeed, all Oregon kids need access to hands-on learning and a path to the future. IP65 will give schools the funds they need to make this type of learning available.

This was more than just a Hermiston class; it was a community at work. Students from Stanfield and Umatilla have the opportunity to bus to Hermiston for classes in construction. I was able to not only work with students from Hermiston, but other students in my district. I was involved with this course for two years. In my junior and senior years, we built houses from the ground up.

This was a hands-on experience, teaching us specific skills as well as awareness of how much goes into building a house. We learned the big things – like framing and foundations. We also learned

about the small details that really impress people—the right colors, molding and finish work, even wireless technologies.

Our instructors were experienced contractors. They knew the craft and the business and they went out of their way to mentor us. They made sure we got exposure to the things that interested us most.

I can speak for my entire team when I tell you we loved doing the work. I even came in extra days to do my work. It was more than just a learning exercise. It felt more like a job – and I was responsible for its success.

Students are curious and clamoring for hands-on experiences. For example, with all the retiring baby boomers, our state has a real need for young people to go into

health care careers – many of which don't require a four-year college degree but instead require technical skills that can start being learned in high school.

Other states offer high school classes on topics like medical interventions, emergency medical technician and math for medical professionals.

I know these classes are appealing to students because they see the real-world benefits of these classes.

The problem is that in Oregon, there just aren't enough classes like these available for high schoolers.

Schools that do have them are forced to fight for grants, which last a couple of years and don't provide stable funding needed to make long-term investments in technology. Which is why

many schools have one vocational or technical career course available. And with just a few subject areas of CTE at a high school, we cannot hope to prepare students for the range of disciplines and skills in today's world.

In short, schools need more dedicated funding for vocational and career technical education. That's what IP65 would do.

With huge numbers of baby boomers exiting the workforce, it's vitally important that Oregon grows its pools of people who understand everything about construction – from carpenters to engineers. The same is true for every industry – from the medical field to high technology.

Why not start educating teenagers in high school with

skills that will make them more employable and improve their earning ability?

IP65 doesn't raise taxes. It doesn't take money away from other important causes. And districts won't be forced to use IP65 dollars.

Instead, IP65 dedicates new state revenue to Oregon's schools. It will allow school districts to determine what their students need to be successful and give them the funds to make sure all high school students have options for career and vocational coursework.

I'm excited by the prospect that in the next few years, access to hands-on learning like I had won't depend on the luck of the draw or where you live. If Oregonians vote "yes" on IP65 in November, we can make this a reality.



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