



# VIEWS & VISIONS

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## Building West Virginia's Workforce

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Bryan Hoylman currently serves as President and Chief Executive Officer of the Associated Builders and Contractors of West Virginia (ABCWW). The organization promotes free enterprise and open competition within the construction industry and protects opportunities for employees, employers and investors based solely on merit.

Prior to joining ABCWW, Hoylman served as a legislative policy analyst for West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey (2013-2014), worked as a senior staff member for Bill Maloney for West Virginia (2011-2012) and spent two years doing government relations work for West Virginia Advocates (2009-2011).

Hoylman currently serves on the Putnam County Planning Commission and the Putnam County Career and Technical Center Advisory Board.

Born and raised in West Virginia, Hoylman graduated from Hurricane High School in 2002. He earned undergraduate degrees in political science and history from West Virginia University.

In recent years, few industries in West Virginia can claim the same level of success as the construction industry. From leading the nation in new construction jobs created in 2017, to some of the highest wage growth in the country, the industry finds it has started to remedy many of the shortfalls that plagued it for so long.

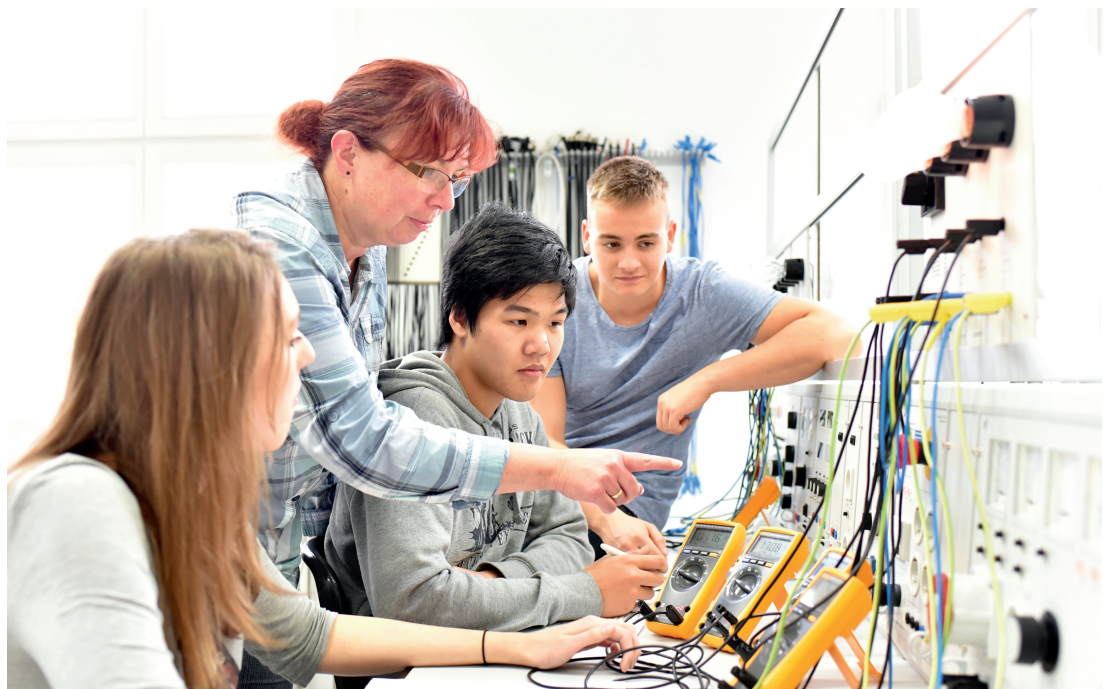
With any success comes new challenges, and West Virginia's construction industry is no different. The expansion in both public and private investment has created unprecedented backlogs, but has also led to a severe shortage in available workforce. What we are left with is the realization that policy and positions of our past make emerging from such a deficit more difficult than it should be.

What stands in our way? It's a combination of things. One, we don't start educating our children about their options outside of college soon enough. We have wonderful higher



education institutions in West Virginia, but we often make the mistake of displaying them as the only viable option for students after high school if they "truly want to be somebody in this world." That's ridiculous. While our county technical programs have made tremendous strides in a short amount of time attempting to address this issue, we must remove the stigma associated with students utilizing those programs while in high school.

As a matter of fact, students who choose the technical program route in high school, followed



by an apprenticeship and/or a two-year technical degree, stand to earn more entering the workforce than their college-bound counterparts. When available options for our students are discussed, technical and collegiate career fields alike need to be given equal standing by our public education system. Technical programs need to be reintegrated back into the actual high schools themselves, and more partnerships need to be developed to establish a legitimate pipeline of young West Virginians into public technical programs and private apprenticeships.

Identifying workers to enter the workforce is only part of the battle. In countless occupations in West Virginia, once you locate people who show aptitude and are willing to put in the time and effort to enter a job site, they're strictly prohibited from doing so. They must first obtain a permission slip from the state, take an exam and pay a fee for the pleasure of working in their chosen field.

While certain forms of occupational licensure aren't necessarily out of the realm of comprehension, some absolutely are and many others are in dire need of reform. We may be on the topic of construction, but in West Virginia you need a license from the government in order to braid hair or be an auctioneer. That usually puts it into perspective how far the state has gone with regards to licensing its workforce, which is entirely too far.

Occupational licenses often come with strict training requirements before you can even sit for the exam. An auctioneer requires over 200 days of training before they can take the exam, pay the fee and get to work. These fees and costs associated with training to obtain an occupational license often restrict those from middle- and lower-class households from entering the workforce, while those who have already obtained them can relish in knowing their competition is limited by the government.



During the 2018 legislative session, the House and Senate looked to reform the HVAC technician licensure requirement. Following its original passage in 2014, it turned out to be like many other burdensome laws – a blanket reform with little acknowledgement for how the industry performs. It required 8,000 hours of training or work experience, examination and fee payment before you could touch any HVAC unit, no matter the size. Small businesses across the state were thrown a massive curveball by not being able to allow their employees to change an air filter unless they had met the four-year training and employment requirement, or they were accompanied by someone who had.

Maintenance divisions at many of the state's most prominent HVAC outfits nearly shut down because they couldn't locate enough technicians to perform basic tune-ups, which drove up the cost for consumers and drove down market availability. The legislature created a separate residential license with actual input from the industry. It wasn't ideal, but it relieved a monumental burden placed on businesses and those seeking to enter the workforce alike. Every single occupational license in West Virginia needs to undergo similar scrutiny and be

subject to complete removal, or, at the very least, a meaningful overhaul.

While an economic turnaround in West Virginia is taking place, it means many positive things for many people: new jobs, new opportunities for those who are underemployed and more wealth in general in a historically poor state. That said, we cannot envision a return to prosperity in the Mountain State without addressing the directional issues facing our youth. We often gripe about our best and brightest leaving the state, but until we give them a clear path upwards, rather than continuing to divert them with obstacles only our legislative leaders can lessen or remove, then we're simply wasting our time. Creating jobs is only half the battle; it's also our responsibility to provide outlets that ensure a qualified workforce to fill them.

The answer to our plight is painfully simple. Educate and encourage young West Virginians, display their options – all of them – and trust in their abilities and their ambitions. They'll take care of the rest. ▾