



Building a new CTE model for underserved students

Community collaboration and partnerships prepare students in disadvantaged neighborhoods for career opportunities in the trades.

By Brad Gentry

Over the past few decades, the skilled trades have been stigmatized as “blue collar” and “grimy.” The national conversation has shifted to college for all, even for students who are uncertain of their future careers. The result has been a [labor market saturated](#) with college graduates.

Meanwhile, trade jobs evolved. Thanks to the technological advances of [Industry 4.0](#),

skilled labor roles are now cleaner and safer. In addition, high demand for skilled trade workers has led to wage increases.

However, due to the focus on college degrees, the talent pipeline for trade labor has grown desperately thin. At the same time, many young people, especially those in underserved communities, are searching for meaningful, well-paying work. The [Tennessee Builders Education Foundation](#) aims to connect young people with careers in the homebuilding industry.

Bringing opportunities to underserved students

The nonprofit TBEF works with institutions, including high schools, to provide students with hands-on training, mentorship and a pathway to the more than 1,700 Mid-South job openings. Traditionally, TBEF has worked with career and technical education schools, but since 2023, we’ve been piloting a new approach at [Trezevant High School](#), a small urban campus in Memphis, Tenn.



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Trezevant isn’t a CTE campus. It’s a neighborhood school in the Frayser community, an underserved part of the city. But that’s what makes this partnership so powerful. We’re learning how to adapt the TBEF model to support students who don’t have traditional access to formal training for the trades. Trezevant students can now graduate with industry-recognized certifications in carpentry, HVAC, plumbing and electrical work.

Collaborating on instructional delivery

TBEF’s work at Trezevant and other institutions is fueled by collaboration. Trezevant is now in its fourth year working through a state-legislated turnaround program with the support of [Cognia](#), a nonprofit that provides evaluation and improvement services to schools. While that organization worked to help Trezevant build [processes](#) for contin-

uous improvement and exit Tennessee’s Priority status list, it also sparked this pilot program by connecting TBEF with school leaders.

TBEF works closely with the West Tennessee Home Builders Association and the [Home Builders Institute](#), the workforce development arm of the National Association of Home Builders. Trezevant juniors and seniors participating in the TBEF program work on HBI’s Pre-Apprentice Certificate Training curriculum.

The PACT curriculum, which covers safety, tool identification, math and employability skills, is embedded in Trezevant’s math program. A dedicated math instructor selected by the school supervises students’ work on the curriculum during regular class time. Cognia still serves as a liaison, fielding our requests and coaching the math teacher on the delivery of the PACT curriculum.

Integrating the real world into learning experiences

Of course, students need to connect what they’re learning in the classroom to the real world. Consequently, hands-on projects are a major component of the TBEF program.

For example, the [Memphis Association of Minority Contractors Association](#) supplements the PACT curriculum with a micro-credential course that teaches blueprint reading and cost estimation. In it, students measure a room’s square footage and compare paint materials to choose the most cost-effective choice for a mock renovation.

Our curriculum also includes a culminating project, which has proven to be the biggest challenge, since Trezevant doesn’t have a workshop area like CTE schools do. For example, our culminating project for the 2024-25 school year involved building picnic tables and landscaping Trezevant’s overgrown courtyard. Local contractors pre-cut the

wood for the tables, and students completed the assembly on-site.

The real-world learning also includes career counseling. One Trezevant graduate who now owns a personnel agency visited the campus to teach students how to create resumes and prepare for interviews.

Incentivizing students and the impact

Many students at Trezevant are juggling more than just school. Some hold down multiple jobs to support their families, so it’s no surprise that those students often skip school or drop out.

That’s why we work with partners like First Bank to recognize students through celebrations, luncheons, gift cards and certifications for work completed. TBEF also offers monetary contributions as incentives for earning certification.

The recognition and incentives are working. In 2023, the same year our partnership began, Trezevant’s graduation rate crossed 70%, surpassing the state-required 67% for the first time. While we’re just one piece of that puzzle, our data shows that students who receive incentives are more likely to complete certification.

More than one path forward

The TBEF program is about expanding options. The PACT curriculum is 95% STEM-aligned, meaning students are prepared for higher education and the workforce. Even students opting for university say the training has helped them see new career possibilities and gain new confidence. Every student deserves the chance to step confidently into the future, whether that path leads to a jobsite, a college campus or both. ●

Brad Gentry is the president of the [Tennessee Builders Education Foundation](#).