

'Blue collar' labor shortage could be boon for HS grads

By Paul Heiser
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A recent study confirms what BOCES career and technical education directors have been telling students for a long time: there are a lot of opportunities for high school graduates in so-called "blue collar" jobs.

In a trend reversal, employers are finding it more difficult to fill positions in both high-wage and low-wage occupations dominated by individuals with high school diplomas and technical certifications than white collar occupations that require a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree.

The Conference Board, a non-profit business membership and research group organization, predicts significant blue collar labor shortages in 2019 and beyond, most notably in transportation, health care support, manufacturing, agriculture, mining and construction.

"The divergence between blue collar and white collar supply is going to persist and even become bigger through 2030," said Gad Levanon, chief economist at The Conference Board and one of the authors of the report.

The Conference Board report identified several reasons for the manual labor shortfall. An emphasis on college for all has produced an excess of people with four-year college degrees who tend to be reluctant to take on jobs in manufacturing and other fields that are hiring. There has also been a graying of the workforce as baby boomers are retiring in increasingly larger numbers.

"This is absolutely a concern across the board," said Amber Mooney, the director of workforce development for The Business Council of New York State. "Even among small companies of 50 or 100 who need to fill only one or two positions a year, it has become very challenging."

Following the law of supply and demand, blue collar wages are expected to rise.

However, employers are expecting a lot from those hired, Mooney said, and many are worried that the average high school graduate won't have all the skills needed to be able to perform well. "Companies are saying 'we want your best 10 %, not your bottom 10 %,'" she told *On Board*.

One of the highest growth areas is so-called "middle skills" jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree, Mooney said. She noted many technical careers require additional training beyond high school for even entry-level jobs. In addition, she said there has been a lot of talk about "middle skills" jobs being referred to as "new collar" jobs.

"They're not your traditional 'blue collar,' but they're also not the ones that

High-paying jobs for HS graduates

Job title	Median pay	Job title	Median pay
Senior piping designer	\$92,600	Instrument and electrical technician	\$68,000
Air traffic controller.....	\$90,600	HVAC service manager	\$67,800
Elevator mechanic.....	\$88,200	Police sergeant	\$67,700
Locomotive engineer	\$80,900	Operating engineer	\$66,600
Journeyman lineman	\$74,700	Electrical supervisor	\$66,000
Boilermaker	\$72,300	Stationary engineer or boiler operator.....	\$65,500
Lineman	\$71,400	HVAC controls technician ..	\$65,200
Refrigeration mechanic	\$68,700		

Source: PayScale survey, Nov. 2016-Nov. 2018.

Note: While some employers may require an associate degree, bachelor's degree or industry certification, many jobs on this list have been available to high school graduates.

require a bachelor's degree," Mooney said. "They do lead to fulfilling careers. In my work, we just don't use the term 'blue collar' anymore."

"Blue collar jobs have changed a lot, particularly in manufacturing," said Tim Ott, director of the CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York, a state contractor. "They are no longer the types of jobs where you come home tired and dirty at the end of the day."

In today's workplaces, employees need communication skills, thinking skills and the ability to work in a team environment. (See story below.)

"We hear a lot from manufacturers'

associations and other employers about the lack of qualified workers," Ott told *On Board*. "We also hear from parents that CTE is great – for someone else's kids."

Federal education policy plays a role, Ott said. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, there was a focus on academic subjects to the point where BOCES stopped providing CTE programs such as business, consumer and family sciences, etc.

The trend has been reversing under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the successor to NCLB, however.

"Under ESSA, the scope of CTE is broadening," said Jay DeTraglia, president

of the state Association of Career and Technical Education Administrators and director of the CTE program at Hamilton Fulton Montgomery BOCES.

Instead of having all students pursue one path, there is a focus on career exploration, particularly at earlier ages. "CTE is not about location," DeTraglia told *On Board*, "but rather a type of instruction."

The State Education Department is promoting CTE through its College, Career, and Civic Readiness Index in its ESSA compliance plan, DeTraglia noted. The index is a method of using diplomas, credentials, advanced course credits and enrollment, CTE certifications, and indicators such as bi-literacy to determine how a school is preparing its students to be ready for college, a career, and civic engagement once students leave the school.

For each accountability subgroup, the CCCR Index ranges from 0 to 200 and is calculated by awarding extra credit for students who exhibit higher levels of readiness as well as partial credit for students who remain in school to complete a High School Equivalency certificate. Participation in CTE is worth two points in the index.

DeTraglia noted that CTE programs have evolved as computers and artificial intelligence have become major parts of manufacturing and other fields. "Factories are more technologically advanced; they require employees to be problem identifiers as well as problem solvers," he said.

The Association of Career and Technical Education Administrators is running a "CTE Strong" campaign to increase awareness of the benefits of CTE. The website www.CTEstrong.com features a video of a teacher performing slam poetry about how the world has changed, and education must change to suit today's learners.

A second phase of the campaign is being readied to show students, schools and parents the specific pathways required by individual career cluster, the steps they need to take along that pathway and how those pathways relate to the courses they need to take.

According to Rachele Romoda, the executive director of the association and supervisor of Instruction at St. Lawrence Lewis BOCES, a cultural shift is underway involving the role of career exploration in every student's experience. It needs to be part of the school culture, she said.

After years of hearing a steady drumbeat that everyone needs to go to four-year college, career and technical programs are receiving due recognition, according to Joseph Dragone, senior executive officer for Capital Region BOCES.

"We are finally seeing the pendulum swing back to the middle," he said. "Career and technical provides tremendous opportunities for students to go right into the workforce with a highly technical skill set and earn a competitive wage."

NSBA commission identifies 'life ready' skills

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The National School Boards Association has released a report that identifies six critical "LifeReady Skills" they consider critical for young people to master in preparation for employment, education and "success in life."

The skills are:

1. Dependability and reliability.
2. Adaptability/trainability.
3. Critical thinking.
4. Decision-making.
5. Customer focus.
6. Teamwork.

The study was authored by NSBA's Commission to Close the Skills Gap, which was created in 2018 and involves major business, trade and membership organizations.

The group made several recommendations on how school boards can ensure students have the opportunity to acquire these six skills. The recommendations

are grouped into three categories: policy, programming and industry engagement.

Policy. Consider requiring each student have work-based learning as a condition for graduating high school. Adopt other policies placing a priority on students developing and enhancing the six skills.

Programming. Be sure students are aware of the range of opportunities before them, and the basic skills needed to be successful on any path. Promote work experience as having similar benefits as sports and extracurricular activities. Host annual career awareness events for regional industries to talk about local careers and include educational sessions where young people can discuss and learn about the six skills.

Industry engagement. Survey local employers annually and meet regularly with an advisory board made up of local business leaders. Participate in local Chambers of Commerce, industry trade associations and similar groups.