



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Chairman Tom Pauken

Opinion/Editorial

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SkillsUSA one of the best kept secrets in Texas **By Tom Pauken**

Competition is a staple of life in school. Athletic events, UIL academic tournaments, the performing arts, debate clubs, and farm and ranch contests all give students opportunities to earn credit toward graduation and gain lifelong skills that can't always be offered within the walls of a classroom.

Yet one of the best-kept secrets in our public schools is another competitive, hands-on program which prepares over a million Texas students for high-paying careers in specific, skilled trades.

SkillsUSA, was founded in 1966 as Vocational Industrial Clubs of America and changed its name in 1999. It sends in skilled workers from various trades to train teachers and students alike on how to perform specialized work. Its goal is to prepare students for a future in a wide variety of trade, technical and skilled service occupations.

Easily recognizable by their bright red blazers at events, the students participate in competitions – featuring a wide variety of contests from graphic design to sheet metal assembly along with leadership conferences.

SkillsUSA includes with its masonry of career training programs ethical lessons. The students recite a creed that teaches the importance of education, fair play, the satisfaction of hard work, the American way of life, and having moral and spiritual standards.

“Forty-five years and not everyone knows about us,” said Linda Holcombe, executive director of the Texas Industrial Vocational Association (which works with SkillsUSA to train career technology teachers).

However, awareness of SkillsUSA is building in Texas. Holcombe said that one of the highlights of the year for their teachers and students occurs during the SkillsUSA-Texas Day at the state Capitol, where a mock legislative session is held.

The exposure at the Capitol is apparently paying off.

“In 2007 ... we aligned 19 career and tech courses to fulfill the fourth year of science and math,”

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Holcombe said. "We've also created a career technology course for a speech credit, and another for a fine-arts credit."

The organization recently wrapped up SkillsUSA Month in March, celebrated in many public schools. Holcombe said SkillsUSA saw a 10 percent membership increase over the past year.

According to Holcombe, industry required certifications are tickets to well-paying jobs in specialized, high-tech fields.

"The certifications keep them from being ditch-diggers," Holcombe said. "They prepare them for the world of work because they get the training industries need."

As one example, home construction courses offered through SkillsUSA do not simply train a student how to be a carpenter. Skills learned may lead to a career in architecture and structural engineering -- "not just hammering in nails," she added.

"Career technology is not the old shop class," she said. "If you're in class and just making ash trays for four years, it should be shut down! Schools need to be up to date with technology and the job market."

Safety is another aspect of career technology training that can be applied to a wide variety of jobs. OSHA certifications are available for students at the entry level, which is a prerequisite in many manufacturing environments.

If you know a junior high or high school student who is interested in 3-D animation, plumbing, advertising art, cosmetology, radio production, firefighting, aircraft repair, drafting, cabinetry, commercial baking, machinery, collision repair, nurse assisting (there are so many I'll have to cut this list short), let them know about SkillsUSA – as well as the good-paying career opportunities that await in skilled labor fields.

More information can be found at www.skillsusa.org.

Tom Pauken is Chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission and author of Bringing America Home.

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The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.