

ASSOCIATED BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS, GREATER MICHIGAN CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, as a response to the growing shortage of craft professionals within the state, Associated Builders & Contractors Greater Michigan Chapter (ABC/GMC) developed a chapter culture described as “grow our own.” The chapter goal of recruiting and training new craft professionals at the secondary level motivated ABC/GMC to develop partnerships with educators throughout the state. “What people don’t understand is that workforce development is the new politics,” says ABC/GMC President/CEO Jimmy Greene. “The sooner folks understand that the two are the same, the smarter and more forward thinking they’ll be.”

Since then, the chapter has partnered with 12 school districts around their state, with additional district partnerships in the works for the 2016-2017 academic year. This industry–education partnership, dubbed the Greater Michigan Construction Academy (GMCA) encompasses 22 current training locations throughout Michigan.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

ABC/GMC began by reaching out to a local school district, Midland County Public schools. Midland was known for its high postsecondary matriculation rate of 73 percent. The matriculation rate is the percent of students that move on to study at 2- and 4-year colleges after high school graduation. Greene contacted superintendent Mike Sharrow and asked, “What do you do with the other 27 percent?” The question opened the door for ABC/GMC to offer assistance via its training programs to Midland and target those students were not planning on continuing their education after graduation.

According to Greene, it was important to begin the partnership with a single district in order to maintain a high level of trust, quality training and manageable growth. The relationship progressed through slow, careful efforts by ABC/GMC to introduce their organization to Midland through site visits, one-on-one discussions, staff introductions and small meetings. Greene noted that building the primary relationship was a key step, “I was trying very hard to make sure they understood that we were not stepping on their toes or trying to beeline their students out of the universities and colleges. I started with one district, so I could perfect the relationship by learning what to say, what the landmines were and how to develop a strong relationship with the superintendent.” Sharrow’s endorsement of ABC/GMC’s methods to other superintendents proved to be a large contributor to the program’s growth. New districts signed partnership agreements with ABC/GMC due to their success with Midland School District. “The superintendent and school district will see you as a valued asset and you will not find a better reference to use moving forward.” said Greene.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The first obstacle for ABC/GMC was knowing whom to contact within the school district. Greene wanted to lay groundwork with someone who had the ability to enact change. By contacting a local superintendent, he was able to build a personal relationship on the basis of mutual respect, understanding and shared goals. It was also important not to place the industry side of the equation at odds with higher education and to simply focus on training and recruiting the students that were not going to college.

Another roadblock that initially slowed growth was the idea of a beta program; districts were hesitant to be the first training program. Greene noted that NCCER's training and curriculum was particularly helpful in building trust in ABC/GMC's methods, due to the availability of portable industry-recognized credentials and continuing education. "When we brought in the NCCER curriculum, we talked about the idea that students are very transient and that if they wanted to pursue careers elsewhere, they could continue their education, because they were in a national database that would track their training and allow them to pick up where they left off."

Parental and public perception was another hurdle for program recruitment. Greene said, "We had to combat the attitude that kids who want to go into the skilled craft professions are failures." ABC/GMC invited parents to attend site tours with their children, talked with them about career opportunities, taught them more about the skilled craft professions and organized father/son and mother/daughter themed events to dispel their misconceptions. To improve public perception of skilled craft professions in Michigan, ABC/GMC developed a marketing campaign called "They Stayed... and Built the Region!" The campaign showcased projects constructed by local contractors and built a sense of local pride.

ACCESSING OPPORTUNITY

Program funding was a fundamental aspect of providing training and crucial to accommodating the program's rapid growth. Greene was instrumental in obtaining over \$857,000 in grants to support daytime training, fund classroom technology and build labs. "From a grant-writing standpoint, ABC and education are a logical fit. It doesn't make sense to train someone for jobs that are not in demand and it's tough to bid projects when you don't have manpower. If you look at the two as interchangeable, it's a pretty easy fit."

Another important factor in program accessibility was bringing training to inner city schools. With chapters nationwide striving to achieve more diversity in their workforce, it made sense to start programs in areas that previously had none, encouraging women and minorities to get their start in the skilled craft professions. By taking NCCER training into these areas, ABC/GMC ensured that qualified workers would be available across the region and not just in the counties immediately surrounding their chapter.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Along with program enrollment, student retention rate was the most important metric used for determining success. Greene said, “Because we start with juniors, the real metric for us is how many come back as seniors. Our retention rate is 100 percent. We haven’t lost a kid yet.” Another key metric for success was the placement rate for students who completed the programs. Currently, 80 percent of students who graduate from ABC/GMC’s partner high schools are placed back into ABC/GMC’s nighttime training program to complete their apprenticeships.

The program is a tremendous resource for ABC/GMC members, who target high-performing students as new recruits before graduation. “Last year we graduated 12 students and all 12 had job offers before they graduated,” says Greene. Additionally, new students have been inspired to enroll in the training programs after hearing graduating students’ success stories. One benefit to association members is that many schools are receiving funding for NCCER training for students, so contractors who hire a program graduate will only need to pay for two more years of training to complete their apprenticeship.

ABC/GMC considers such early success an indicator of things to come. “It’s still early, but it’s a really good start for what we’re trying to do, especially considering we didn’t have any historical data from which to go on,” says Greene. “It’s been very successful. It’s the pride of our chapter, not just for staff, but our board members and our community also—if you were to ask the chamber of commerce, or the school districts in particular, we’ve become not just a project, but a very valued partner to them.”

SUMMARY

Green noted some things that have made the process of building new relationships with schools across the state easier. A willingness to take action was invaluable, along with partner flexibility and fully invested time and resources. Developing new training programs also requires a large time commitment. Today, Greene estimates his time as being divided 60 percent ABC advocacy and 40 percent education.