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EDUCATION

As career tech becomes cool in Ohio, can the state meet the demand?



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Goldie Bowsher isn't just studying construction management at Tolles Career and Technical Center in Plain City – she's helping build it up for the next generation of career tech students studying at the school.

Bowsher is interning as a construction manager, helping coordinate an expansion to the career-tech school that is experiencing meteoric growth in enrollment from the seven districts that feed it. The Plain City campus has more than 1,300 students enrolled this school year — up from 600 students in 2021.

"I got multiple other opportunities to go do internships with other companies, and they were all great," Bowsher said. "I want to be part of helping the incoming classes having those opportunities – and even better opportunities than I had – so being able to take part of that is really amazing."

Bowsher and thousands of other workforce and trades students across the state are part of the changing landscape of education in Ohio as students shift away from a four-year education track and towards high-paying jobs directly in the workforce.

Interest is growing among students for workforce skills and career-technical education (CTE). The number of students enrolling in career technical programs has been steadily increasing across Ohio.

In 2020-2021, 43,131 Ohio students enrolled in Joint Vocational School Districts, which are direct educational providers for career-tech students to learn trade skills, according to state data. By the 2024-2025 school year, that number had grown to 51,070 – an 18.4% increase over five years.

Intel Corp.'s planned New Albany semiconductor campus is part of what's driving growth in the sector, at least in the nearby area. Career and Technology Education Centers of Licking County has had a 50% enrollment increase in five years, also driven by a growth in manufacturing, information technology and health care needs, said Superintendent Michelle Snow.

"We need students that are able to think and problem-solve and collaborate and work in teams," Snow said. "And those are things we've done in career centers for a very long time."

According to a 2025 Ohio Department of Education and Workforce report, there were 91,015 Ohio students in a career technical education workforce development pathway in any school during the 2023-2024 school year. This number is included in the total 141,503 Ohio students participating in at least one CTE course in grades 7-12. Overall, the state has seen a 10% growth in the number of students participating in CTE over the past four years.

U.S. Sen Jon Husted, who emphasized career-tech education during his time as the state's lieutenant governor, said expanding access to workforce education is part of a "a virtuous circle of putting people to work, having employers expand and creating prosperity in your community."

"I think a lot of those things are appealing because (students are) like 'This is cool stuff,'" Husted said. "When you go into these labs today, it's not junk. It's high-tech. These are cool places."

In the central Ohio JobsOhio region, 25.5% of high school students are participating in some form of CTE. That's more than 26,400 students.

Still, as interest grows, so does the challenge of meeting the demand with the supply.

But the ODEW report notes that "counties such as Delaware and Franklin show comparatively lower levels of participation relative to other nearby counties, pointing to possible challenges in program access or prioritization."

For example, the Columbus City Schools Career and Technical Planning District (which includes Fort Hayes Career Center and Downtown High School) had 2,423 applicants in 2025 but only admitted 773 students. Each CCS program reserves 80% of available seats for students residing within Columbus City Schools and 20% for students from the district's partner schools, which include Westerville, Grandview Heights and Upper Arlington City Schools. In recent years, applications to CCS career center programs have increased significantly, leading to waitlists in many high-demand pathways including cosmetology, nursing and welding.

Is career tech finally cool?

As if to reflect the growing demand for workforce education, in 2023 the Ohio General Assembly changed the once-Ohio Department of Education to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

Stephen Dackin, ODEW director, said workforce development was underprioritized by the state for decades.

"I think 20, 25 years ago we fell in love with the bachelor's degree," Dackin said. "It was the college-for-all approach and it was well-intentioned, but the job prospects then are really different than they are now."

The growth in workforce and trades students reflects attitudes shifting away from a stigma against students pursuing a trades education. For years, going into a trade has been seen as something lesser than a four-year college degree.

"Tolles and other technical skills are viewed (by others) as 'You're dumb, and you're not good enough to get into college," said Bowsher, who is a high-GPA student in school. "I'm not dumb – I want to go here because I'm not motivated to go to college and be in debt when I'm 45."

Max Gannon, a senior studying welding at Tolles, sees his new trade of welding as an art form to master.

"It was like a passion that drove me farther," Gannon said. "No matter what I do, I put 110% effort into anything, and every day I went into welding, that just drove me more."

Gannon, like many students pursuing a trades career in high school, is wary about the costs and risks associated with a four-year education. With welding, he sees a pathway to high-income work in the aerospace or the pipeline industry.

He's also already making money while developing their skills.

"Four years is a lot of money, you can go into debt and it takes a lot of years to get out of that debt," he said. "It's better to understand your trade and learn a trade than not."

A 2025 poll conducted by CBS News found that 33% of registered voters agreed that a four-year college degree is “worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more money over their lifetime.” But 63% agreed that it’s “not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off.”

When the same poll was conducted in 2017, the results were nearly a 50-50 split.

Convincing the parents

However, some of the stigma still remains, according to the 2025 annual "Blue Collar Report" by Jobber, a workforce research firm. Only 7% of parents surveyed said they would prefer their child pursue a trade or vocational education and among

Gen Z people surveyed, 19.6% said they didn't apply because they didn't feel it was as respected as a college education and 13.3% said they didn't think their parents would support them.

Mike Temple, a physician and parent of a student who graduated from the Tolles welding program, said he wasn't familiar with Tolles when his son said he wanted to attend. After seeing his son succeed in welding, he said he has done a "180-degree flip on trade schools."

"I've been to a lot of school, so it was weird for my son to not want to go to college," Temple said. "I'm absolutely grateful for him finding Tolles and pursuing that."

Tolles Superintendent Todd Hoadley said it is often the parents who are the hardest to convince of the value in a workforce education, as they often place a higher emphasis on a four-year degree.

"You can see there's a little apprehension, that this maybe wasn't the plan I had for my son or daughter," Hoadley said. "Yet they see the spark and then when they do allow the student to come here ... parents see the learning that takes place here and the excitement their student has for that learning, they become full onboard and become some of our biggest supporters."

It's not just attitudes toward higher education driving growth toward trades education – but also concerns about artificial intelligence. In Jobber's report, 77% of Gen Z surveyed say it's important to them to find a job that can't be automated.

Matt Szollosi, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades, said the statewide union advocacy group launched an initiative alongside the ODEW to provide school counselors with four hours of apprenticeship training so they can explain to students what a trades career might be like. Szollosi said there is a growing demand for skilled construction trades workers in the face of automation.

"We feel very comfortable we can see our membership grow by 30% in the next five years," Szollosi said. "And we feel that those are not unachievable or unreasonable

projections at all."

Brian Huston, a welding instructor at Eastland Career Center, said when he attended Eastland in the 1990s, the prevailing attitude was that everybody should go to college. He said he's seeing that mentality shift.

"Now we've flipped the script – now trade schools are okay, trade schools are a good route to go," Huston said.

Attending a trade school isn't just for "traditional" trades like welding and construction. Most schools offer nursing training or even specialized programs like aviation, which often have a higher-education pathway to pursue.

Isael Bello, a senior studying aviation at Eastland Career Center, said the trade school was helping him get closer to his lifelong goal of a career in aviation and staying "three steps ahead of the competition" when he moves onto the next steps of his education, rather than sitting in classes all day at his home school in Reynoldsburg City Schools.

"What you learn here is almost as much as you learn in college," Bello said. "I'm not saying it's competition, but it's made me feel that every single day I've accomplished something and that I'm getting closer to what I want."

Zoe McWherter, a senior studying nursing at Tolles, is currently getting hands-on experience interning at OhioHealth Doctor's Hospital. She said learning a trade before graduating high school will help her pursue her dream of obtaining a master's degree and open her own practice.

"In terms of hire-ability – nothing beats real experience," McWherter said. "You can have whatever grades on your GPA, you can whatever AP classes you've taken ... but nothing is going to be like No. 1, being hired by an industry partner and No. 2, actually going and succeeding in that field."

As trades, career education grow in popularity, supply and access lag demand

According to data provided by ODEW, an optional survey to assess the enrollment and capacity of career-technical education programs found that districts and schools have reported a total of 45,765 students on waitlists statewide for CTE programs. Out of the 4,716 programs that completed the survey, 640 indicated having a waitlist.

An ODEW report says that while many parts of the state have high levels of access at the high school level to CTE, many parts of the state lack access at the high school level or middle school level. In some suburban districts like Bexley City Schools and Upper Arlington City Schools, participation in CTE is nearly nonexistent.

For example, in Upper Arlington City Schools, 86% of graduating high schoolers entered college or university within two years, but a little over 3% graduated with an industry-recognized credential, according to 2025 ODEW data. Dackin said a new state requirement for every high schooler to develop a graduation plan will help students across all parts of the state develop a plan and get them "exposed to what good jobs exist in the community."

Tolles' Hoadley said that the philosophy at his school is to avoid a waitlist wherever possible. Oftentimes, he said, that means encouraging students to enroll in another program while they wait to see if their program of choice becomes available. Nearly 1,300 students applied for Tolles last year, and only 80 ended up on a waitlist.

"We want any way to get to 'Yes we can,'" Hoadley said. "We work hard to have students and their parents understand what a great opportunity this is – and waitlists are our enemies."

Dackin said that the department is now requiring districts to develop a graduation plan for students and working for a larger scale expansion of access and exposure to CTE programs in high school and middle school.

"We've got to figure out how we get the emerging workforce to understand what opportunities they have and the opportunity to acquire these necessary skills to be employed upon graduation," Dackin said.

Some school districts are aiming to address the shortage right at their home schools. One of the school districts with the highest rate of CTE participation in the state is North Union Local Schools, where 92.7% of the district's high schoolers participate in some sort of CTE education.

Justin Ufferman, the Union County district' superintendent, said that North Union was ahead of the state when it began offering "clearer pathways" for CTE around five years ago.

"We were embracing it before the state even knew they wanted it," Ufferman said. "I think it puts a little bit ahead of other districts. And now we're just growing it out even more."

By the end of a North Union student's sophomore year, they begin declaring an "educational pathway," whether that be agricultural science, engineering, business, pre-nursing or another. Unlike many districts in the region, Ufferman said the district offers many options for CTE on-site.

"The things we're doing here are not typically seen in a public school, most of the things we're doing here involve a STEM or technical school," Ufferman said.

Sen. Husted said continuing to develop Ohio's skilled workforce isn't just good for Ohio – failing to do so could mean the difference between prosperity and decline.

"Communities that get their workforce delivery system right – they'll see employers grow, they'll see their young people stay in their communities and they will create a rising tide," Husted said. "If they fail to do so, the opposite will happen."

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