

On the education front

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Several important announcements by the Ontario government over the past two months have been lost in all the noise about current contract negotiations. Those announcements have put skilled trades at the front and centre for the first time in a long time and that's good news. Why? Because enrolment in trades programming has been consistently falling for some time now and that means the day might come when your plumbing goes down the drain, your dwelling falls in to disrepair and the elevator your riding in doesn't quite go all the way to the top. Trades are the like the engine of a car. The trades are what keep everything else moving.

Labour Minister Monte McNaughton recently announced that "for too long we haven't viewed these challenging positions as a viable first option," adding "we have to challenge the stigma" and encourage more Ontarians to consider a path other than university. To that end, the Ontario government is investing over \$75 million dollars in an initiative to promote the skilled trades including advertising, an investment of about \$42 million in SHSM* programming and \$20+ million allocated to pre-apprenticeship programs with a further \$12+ million towards a youth apprenticeship program. In an economy that Mr. Ford describes as "booming," there are apparently thousands of jobs going unfilled for want of qualified candidates. I can attest to this personally, our business is doing well but hiring qualified skilled trades employees is proving virtually impossible. It's about time we seriously questioned the government about their online learning proposals (and all those leaked memos!) and started talking about hands-on learning.

SHSM programming, for those who are unfamiliar with the term, provides options for students in high school to graduate with a Specialist High Skills Major in a particular area. They are able to direct and focus their learning, in grades 11 and 12, in a specific skill while still meeting all standard Ministry of Education requirements. They take a "bundle" of courses geared to their area of interest and / or participate in co-operative education opportunities. Students can choose from Hospitality and Tourism, the Arts, Business, Construction, Manufacturing and more. It's a start but there's more to be done.

Schools would benefit from a further investment in machine shops and auto tech. Remember those? I might be dating myself but do you recall the days when one could take a car apart and put it back together again or learn the inner workings of machining metal parts? "Shop" (as some of these courses were collectively known as colloquially) was where students who were good at working with their hands, who were proficient in math and more, would learn to read blueprints, diagrams and technical drawings and where one would be exposed to career opportunities that led to college and/or a career in the trades. Many of those shops have now disappeared entirely from schools due to funding cuts. Yet, independently owned small businesses are considered an economic driver, with those employing 99 staff or less, making up 69.7%* of the total labour force and many of these owned and operated by persons skilled in a particular trade. It just makes good economic sense to focus more education dollars towards this kind of hands-on education. I'm holding a great deal of faith that this new influx of trades related cash be put to good use.

With one in five jobs expected to be generated in the trades over the next five years, stepping up to support trades education is both necessary and crucial. I invite the Ford government to go one step further and actually consult with those small businesses that drive our economy. Then, while you're negotiating with the unions about classroom size and educational supports, consider also adding to the programming roster and return "shop" to more schools. Make an education in the trades as easily accessible as we make a university-focussed education because no matter what you do and where you go in life, chances are high that folks owning or working in a successful business in the trades helped pave the way.