

Oral Testimony of

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**Senate Committee on Small Business and
Entrepreneurship**

On

**“How Innovative Education Systems Can Better Prepare
Students to Enter the Workplace”**

Chairman Vitter, members of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship and honored guests.

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Alvin Bargas. I serve as the president of Pelican Chapter Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The Pelican Chapter’s volunteer leaders are committed to training a safe, highly skilled construction workforce. The Chapter offers construction craft education programs at its Baton Rouge and Lake Charles training centers and 19 plus satellite locations to

currently more than 2,100 students. Since 1983, ABC member contractors and industry-related partners have privately funded more than \$56,000,000 in training costs.

ABC has partnership agreements with 53 high schools in 23 school districts, which include 84 classes with more than 1,200 students per year in high-demand crafts such as welding and pipefitting. We also engage high school students through craft competitions and a three-day Build Your Future event. In addition to funding, ABC members alone donate more than \$60,000 per year in materials and equipment and volunteer 1,800 plus hours annually in classrooms.

Louisiana's construction industry now faces a workforce challenge. Project announcements in excess of \$60 billion in new construction, plus the expansion of existing facilities is driving the need for skilled workers. Retirements, career changes, etc. will drive demand for an additional 51,300 workers.

Even with an exploding demand for a skilled construction workforce, public high schools continue to focus on the four-year college prep curriculum. While this pathway is important,

students should be offered opportunities to learn skills that prepare them for high paying, in-demand careers that do not require a bachelor's degree. That said, the expansion of Career and Technical Education (CTE) options should never come at the expense of academic rigor or quality instruction and must clearly align with industry workforce needs and post-secondary credentials.

ABC and its partners are leading the charge to align our education system with future workforce demands. Construction industry and education stakeholders established a Craft Workforce Development Taskforce, which created a strategic roadmap titled "Building Louisiana's Craft Workforce."

The Taskforce has ensured that an industry recognized and academically rigorous construction CTE curriculum will be consistently delivered across Louisiana's training providers. The Louisiana Community and Technical college System (LCTCS) and the Louisiana Department of Education have adopted the curriculum of the NCCER which blends classroom instruction with hands-on training and articulates to post-secondary credential and community college programs.

The training providers are focused on leveraging capacity at high schools as well as leveraging assets such as facilities and funding with private providers. Training delivery includes compressed schedules for industry based certifications as well as evening and weekend class alternatives.

The Louisiana state government also has enacted innovative education reforms, such as Supplemental Course Academy (SCA). This program gives high school students the option to choose from a diverse range of courses, including core academics, college preparation and career training.

Through SCA, students can customize their learning path by gaining industry-based certifications, in addition to earning high school and college credit. The program provides all Louisiana students equal access to career training and a head-start on a postsecondary credential and ultimately a career.

SCA can serve as a catalyst to recruit and train capable young people to either step into higher-wage construction jobs or continue on to complete post-secondary courses. To achieve this,

SCA provides that students, parents and school counselors collaborate to make sure students register in courses that are appropriate for their age, interests and capabilities. As a SCA provider, ABC is offering electrical, pipefitting, millwright, and welding to 119 students.

Our challenge ahead is to focus our current resources to support CTE programs for in-demand industries that provide students with innovative and flexible training options that stretch from high school to advanced postsecondary credentials. This includes promoting new and existing partnerships between industries, government, and education providers while establishing clear accountability indicators and easily understood measures of success.

On behalf of Associated Builders and Contractors Pelican Chapter, I'd like to thank the subcommittee for holding today's hearing on this important subject.