

School of Rock

Last spring, 10 ambitious high school seniors from the Surrey School District were studying for their final exams and attending grad parties with their friends.

By August, they were B&B Contracting's newest construction apprentices working 40-plus hours a week building British Columbia.

And they couldn't have been more driven.

"I'm definitely going to be pointing out things I built while we're driving down the road," said 17-year-old Corbin Lanz, smiling.

Lanz, who graduated from Surrey's Lord Tweedsmuir Secondary, and nine other grads from around the Surrey School District were part of a first-time training and employment partnership between the school district, B&B Contracting, and Local 1611.

Students took the four-week Level 1 Construction Craft Worker apprentice program at Training PLUS (Professional Labourers' Union School) last July. Their technical training comprised 120 hours of classroom and practical experience with instruction focused on site safety, the operation of construction equipment and tools, material handling, concrete and masonry, utilities and pipeline, and roadwork.

After four weeks, students wrote a final exam and were then dispatched to B&B Contracting for what could be a lifelong career complete with family-supporting and progressive wages, benefits, pension, job security and opportunities for advancement.

Owing to an arsenal of varied competencies, Construction Craft Workers are extremely versatile and can work on a multitude of different jobs.

The skilled construction trades like CCW are becoming increasingly popular as students and parents alike discover that university isn't the only pathway to success.

LiUNA Local 1611's Training PLUS Administrator Tom Miller attended Fraser Valley University out of high school, intent on a diploma in Business Administration. He spent his first two summers between semesters working alongside his dad at a unionized construction company. He liked the work and he liked the money, and he decided it was the better career for him.

"My parents weren't exactly pumped but I think they got over it," quipped Miller.

Miller worked his way up the ranks, changing employers, and ultimately joining Training PLUS as an instructor. He became the program's administrator in 2019 and now oversees Local 1611's entire training suite and sits on its Executive Board.

As far as Miller is concerned, union trades training centres like Training PLUS are the best-kept secret in the building trades. "You can get a trade certification, and most of the time you don't even have to pay for it – and you get a great career."

School districts are picking up on this sea change. That's definitely the case in Surrey, where Brad Edmondson and his team work hard to ensure students understand the possibilities and potential that exist within the lucrative construction sector.

The skilled trades offer top wages and job security, the opportunity to earn while you learn, financial incentives ranging from student grants to tax rebates on tools and travel, and even prestige: the ability to say, "I built that."

“Not all students want to go to university when they finish high school,” said Edmondson, the district’s Youth Work in Trades Co-ordinator.

