

Molding Chicago's Workforce

Charter High School Offers Inner-City Youth Construction Training

With doom-and-gloom economic forecasts for the construction industry blanketing the airwaves and being talked about in board rooms, it's easy to be pessimistic about the future of construction.

Geri Harston takes a different view. She feels as if she's surrounded by Chicago's future construction workforce every day.

"What we're doing is giving the kids options," says Harston, Executive Director of ACE Tech Charter High School, which was designed for Chicago students interested in a future in architecture, construction or engineering.

"We're exposing young people to different careers in the building trades and construction and exposing them to options that they may not have considered until well after college. College graduation rates have been dismal, in particular in the African-American and Hispanic communities, and we've found that part of the reason is the students go in there not really knowing what they want to study."

ACE Tech's second graduating class will leave the halls this summer. Harston anticipates 85 to 100 graduates per year from the school, which is geared toward introducing inner-city youth to three fields in which minorities are underrepresented and are facing a potential labor crisis in the years to come.

Thorne Associates, Inc. President Dana Thorne serves on the Board of Directors for ACE Tech, and sees tremendous potential for a future workforce.

"ACE Tech provides a better opportunity for inner-city kids to get into a good school or get a scholarship or get into the trades," he said. "The goal

is to get students in college for architecture and engineering and get the kids who are interested into the various apprenticeships.

"It's advantageous for contractors because it's going to give us a greater pool of qualified labor. The emphasis isn't so much on training the kids as it is on providing them with a good, solid core education. The unions have told us that the kids just need to get a good basic education, and they'll take it from there."

Outside of its own shop class and an after-school program, Chicago public school students are able to get hands-on experience at an expo run by CISCO. The school has plans in the future to partner with Habitat For Humanity.

"They're motivated to be here already and really all we need to do is give them that little bit of focus that they need," Harston said. "We don't want them to hop around from major to major. We've got about 20 percent of our kids that are interested in the building trades as a living and we want to help them take the needed steps toward apprenticeship."



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