

EDUCATION

BY KAYLENE SELK

Reading, writing, arithmetic ... and construction safety

Funding cuts are a sad reality for schools across the country. From art to physical education, schools have been forced to cut programs due to declining budgets.

Several years ago at McKay High School in Salem, lack of funding forced administrators to cut construction classes. The discontinued classes, which taught students basic construction and safety skills, gave aspiring construction workers a head start. The classes were beneficial to students and, in the face of a declining workforce and increased demand for workers, to the state.

Enter the Oregon Department of Transportation to the rescue.

The agency's Office of Civil Rights helped secure federal funding worth up to \$35,000, and instructors were able to begin offering the construction class again at McKay High School this spring. ODOT is helping to fund the class as part of its efforts to prepare a qualified labor pool that will address a forecasted shortage of skilled people to work on the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program and other transportation infrastructure projects statewide.

Besides funding the class itself, staff from Oregon Bridge Delivery Partners, the program management firm for the bridge program, helped teach an important segment: ODOT's customized safety training gave 14 students in the class a leg up on other potential young construction workers.

The students – 13 boys and one girl – participated in a six-hour safety training modeled on the Occupational Health and Safety Administration 10-hour class, required of many people working for ODOT and the bridge program. While these students are too young to receive an OSHA 10 card, they will receive a Construction Safety Certificate issued by OBDP.

"A lot of these students are from trade families," said Kerry Green, the students' high school construction class teacher. "There's the background, but not always the interest. It's classes like these, taught by credible people, that spark that interest."

Angela Ramos, ODOT Office of Civil Rights equal employment opportunity/on-the-job training officer and OTIA III manager, established the partnership between ODOT and the Salem/Keizer School District.

"The safety certificate provides the students with something to show potential summer employers," Ramos said. "We believe that, at the very least, this type of safety training will provide students a foundation from which to pursue the OSHA 10 card. And, with any luck, it will encourage their interest in the construction field."

Gregg Johnson, OBDP's health and safety manager, taught the comprehensive class, covering topics from ladder safety to cranes and exca-



At the newly reinstated construction course at McKay High School, which was made possible in part by the Oregon Department of Transportation, students learn important skills that equip them to pursue a career in the trades.

vations. The students practiced putting on fall-protection harnesses, examined damaged electrical equipment for typical faults and analyzed photographs to identify common construction hazards.

"From an employer's standpoint, having the safety certificate is a good thing, but what really sets these kids apart is that they showed interest in working for that certificate," Johnson said. "That shows gumption and work ethic. Those qualities, and being trained to respect the role of safety at a job site, will take these kids a long way."

An advisory panel of several construction contractors is working with the school to develop the curriculum and to help channel the students into summertime work in the field. Next year, the program will expand to include hands-on events such as site visits to a local bridge program project on Interstate 5.

Kaylene Selk is with Oregon Bridge Delivery Partners.