

What Will Be the Fate of Welding Education in Your State?

The state of Connecticut is cutting back funding for welding education and a educator can't get straight answers as to why

BY KATHLEEN MCGIRR

This viewpoint is in regard to the shutting down of three welding programs in Connecticut's vocational technical schools. As a welding instructor and chairperson of the AWS Connecticut Section, I want to get the word out how welding programs are viewed in this state, and solicit your help in spreading this word (kathleen.mcgirr@po.state.ct.us).

In 1978 there were 12 vocational welding shops in Connecticut, and most programs ran as a two-instructor shop for 9-12 grade students. As welding teachers started to retire from the system, the programs were never replaced with new instructors, and the shops filled with good fabrication and welding machines sat idle year. I was one of those in this group. The reason for this action is still a guess at best for us. Some said the shops were very costly to maintain and keep running, and perhaps the state money could be better spent elsewhere, especially since Connecticut has gotten itself into a tight budget situation. Some believed that since some programs, if not all, had adults in attendance, it was thought the focus should be on the high school level only. Again, we are left to only assume the real causes. Also, there were erroneous rumors that we had no enrollment. Those who thought that should have done their homework and come to the schools to see how many welders we were putting to work. There were times when we didn't have enough to supply industry.

Three instructors' lives were turned upside down in a matter of a two-month summer vacation. Upon returning to our jobs in September, we were informed the day before the students were to arrive for classes that we had 24 hours to change our positions to other technical schools. This resulted in one of us losing the status of department head, another being totally removed from the welding field to become a floater within the building, and one forced into retirement.

Although we appreciate being employed within the school system, this just was not the way we should have been

for months at a time. In some cases, there was a free-for-all as other shops rummaged through the equipment and chose anything they thought they might need.

For some time now welding instructors have been seeking from directors, superintendents, lawmakers, the governor, commissioners, and consultants answers as to why these shops are always put on the chopping block as an easy way out. The answers don't come, and we are left to wonder, is it a money issue? Perhaps bringing in welders from other states like New York and Massachusetts to do our bridge work and repairs will save Connecticut more money. Or is because an uneducated group in power thinks welding has become obsolete and treated after all our years of dedicated service. We as welding instructors put everything into teaching and doing our best to provide area industry with the type of people they require. Making exceptions to go beyond our curriculum was nothing new to us if a company had certain welding needs. We gave students the chance to become productive workers and citizens.

Although welding is not the cleanest or most attractive trade, it has brought many rewards to those who learn the skill. It definitely is a trade that cannot be taught in a short time. Some types of welding take years of experience and knowledge of metallurgy to achieve expertise. It is a skill taken for granted by those who don't understand welding.

While we as welders seem to be the only ones who realize that our everyday life has welding written all over it, it is unfortunate that those who are ignorant of welding are unwilling to become educated to the trades. Perhaps when welding is no longer taught, these people who could have made a difference will finally understand the damage that has been done because the state no longer produces skilled welders. They are the ones who will be responsible for Connecticut's dependence on other states for skilled labor. They say, "Let's focus more on the cleaner jobs, such as computers, and let someone else do the hard work." Perhaps that is why the

perhaps an unattractive trade? Regardless of whom we have contacted for the past 20 years, they all say they are sympathetic to our concerns, and they agree with us that the trade of welding is important in industry, yet we still cannot get the support or the voice we need to make changes. Decisions are being made for us without our input.

In 2003 the state of Connecticut had five welding shops that were running at full capacity, filling the construction needs of the state. At mid school year, three schools, two department heads, and one welding instructor were informed that the welding shops and their positions would be eliminated at the end of the school year. The younger generation wants to be paid big dollars for doing as little work as possible. We've made it to easy for them, and this is what they learn.

It was recently brought to my attention that welder training in Waterbury is not a main priority. The director of the school has been quoted as saying he would prefer to have health trades occupy the welding area. This is an unusual decision since the director before him moved our nurses' program out of the school to an area college a year ago. I wonder what that cost? Who is allowed to make these rash decisions? In my 18 years in the school system, I have seen so much of Connecticut's money spent uselessly. Each new director has an agenda as to what should be taught in the trade school. I have experienced multiple directors and assistants. I was expected to abide by and understand their views and decisions, but, in my opinion, each made a little mess, and then moved on to another school to create yet another mess.

The technical schools in Connecticut are declining due to poor decisions. Perhaps more communication is needed among the directors, superintendents, and the trade instructors. After all, the trade instructors are the ones who maintain enrollment and keep the doors open. If it were not for the blue-collar instructors, these people might not have jobs. ♦