



BUILD MONTANA

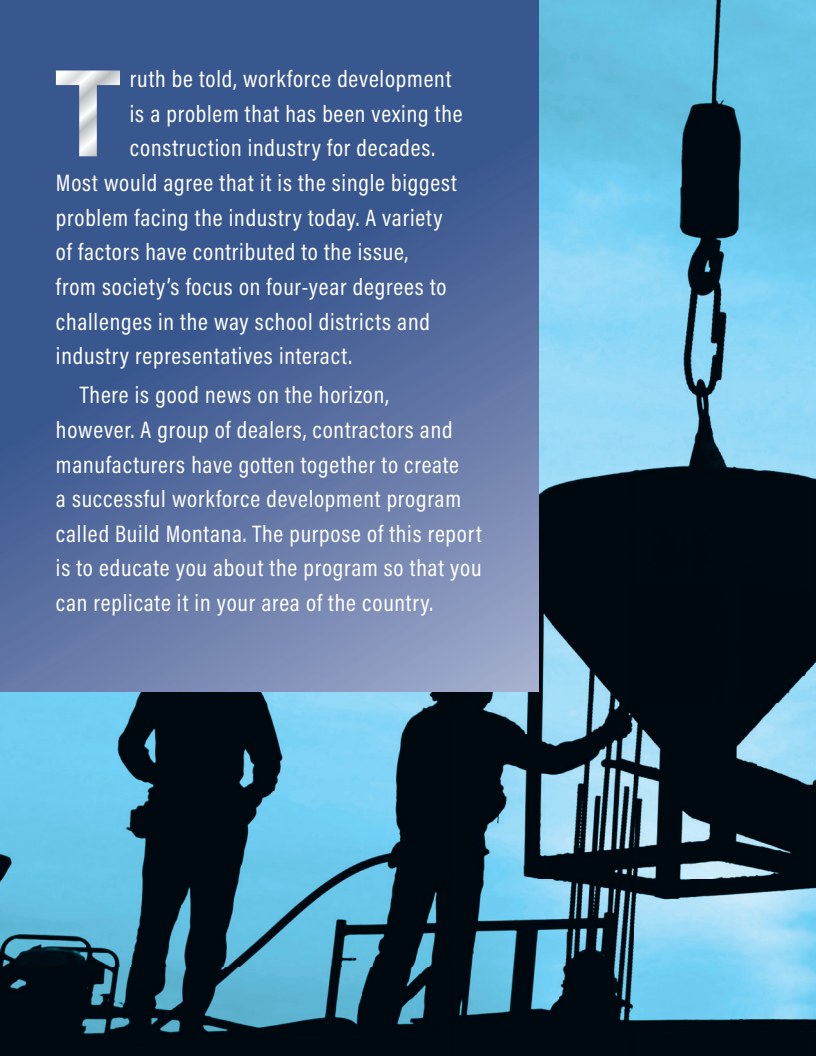
10 SOLID STEPS

FOR REPLICATING THIS SUCCESSFUL
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAM IN YOUR STATE

Truth be told, workforce development is a problem that has been vexing the construction industry for decades.

Most would agree that it is the single biggest problem facing the industry today. A variety of factors have contributed to the issue, from society's focus on four-year degrees to challenges in the way school districts and industry representatives interact.

There is good news on the horizon, however. A group of dealers, contractors and manufacturers have gotten together to create a successful workforce development program called Build Montana. The purpose of this report is to educate you about the program so that you can replicate it in your area of the country.





WHAT IS BUILD MONTANA?

Build Montana is a partnership between the Montana Contractors Association (MCA), the Montana Equipment Dealers Association (MEDA) and the MCA Education Foundation that is designed to generate excitement and promote careers in the construction industry. There are many facets to the overall program, but our main focus here will be the heavy equipment curriculum that is being offered to high school students.

Build Montana launched its first course in the Billings School District on February 1, 2021. Six students went through the program the first year, and 14 students attended in the spring of 2022 in both Billings and Kalispell, Mont. A significant increase — potentially up to 50 students — is expected for 2023. We'll delve into the details here shortly, but the bottom line is that the program has been a huge success and is a great model for others to follow.

"Yes, the program has been a ton of work, but I wholeheartedly believe it has been worth every bit of effort we have put into it," said Adam Gilbertson, vice president of RDO Equipment Co., who is one of the founding principals of Build Montana.

Now let's take a look at the steps you need to take to start a similar program in your area.

STEP ONE. FIND PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS.

The first step is getting together with other distributors, contractors and manufacturers in your area (see sidebar for a list of companies who have participated in Build Montana). And yes, competitors work side by side without any issues as part of the program.

“That is really the most unique aspect of Build Montana; all these fierce competitors are now working in conjunction with each other,” said Barry Houser.

Barry Houser is the MCA director for marketing and communications, and he is another founding principal of Build Montana (and also serves as executive director of MCA's Education Foundation).

It should also be said that the companies who were initially involved with Build Montana received great coverage in the press, and that fact was very



Build Montana Partners

The following companies have participated in Build Montana

DISTRIBUTORS

RDO Equipment Co.
Tractor & Equipment Co.
Tri-State Truck & Equipment Inc.

CONTRACTORS

Knife River Co.
COP Construction LLC
Schellinger Construction
(Columbia Falls)

MANUFACTURERS

John Deere
Caterpillar
Volvo

influential in getting other industry vendors to participate as the program expanded. John Deere was the first manufacturer on board, and Caterpillar and Volvo have since signed on as well.

Please note that AED can serve as a resource here too. AED can assist AGC state chapters who are interested in finding dealers who would be interested in starting a program. The AED contact is Sean Fitzgerald, senior director of workforce and industry initiatives. His phone number is (630) 352-9372, and his email is sfitzgerrel@aednet.org.

STEP TWO. ESTABLISH THE BOSSES.

Once you have partners on board, the next step is to decide on a management team, so to speak. In Montana, the team included Houser, Gilbertson and John Hurd of RDO Equipment, the third founding principal, who has an extensive background in education. These three did the heavy lifting to get the program off the ground.

STEP THREE. NAME A COORDINATOR.

Next, you need to have a program coordinator in place who will work with the management team to help launch the initiative. In Montana, MCA's board of directors approved funding to pay for a coordinator on a contractual basis. If that is not an option in your state, companies can pool money to fund the position, or a company may allocate an employee to serve in the role.

If you're hiring someone, Houser recommends allocating \$20,000 to \$25,000 to get the program underway for the first four months. It should be noted, though, that MCA found the coordinator invaluable, so he remains in the role to this day.

Initially, the coordinator serves as a liaison between the industry and the school district, and this person helps to establish the objectives and curriculum for the program. Please see the sidebar for a full list of the program coordinator's responsibilities.

STEP FOUR. FIND A FRIENDLY FACE IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT.

If you can find a champion in the school district to help launch the program, this is most definitely the way to go. Here is a list of potential contacts at the school level: superintendents, principals, CTE teachers, school career and guidance counselors, school board members. Sometimes even the Economic Development Board of your local Chamber of Commerce will have access to the right school contacts.

Please also note that flexibility is key when working with school district contacts. "There has to be give and take on both sides, and compromises have to be made," said Bo Bruinsma, career outreach director for the Billings School District, a key player in the success of the Build Montana program. "Both parties have to be willing to figure out solutions to issues that come up along the way."

INSIDER TIP: *If you come across a school that is resistant to bringing your program on board, be sure to mention other schools that have already signed on. This approach has worked wonders for Build Montana, especially in areas where schools are highly competitive with one another.*

STEP FIVE. DETERMINE THE CURRICULUM.

You have to determine what your program will focus on and how the classes will be structured. For Build Montana, the program coordinator worked closely with Hurd to establish the curriculum and associated details. Fortunately, Build Montana had a head start on this aspect — Gilbertson had a good relationship with John Deere, and John Deere University allowed its curriculum to be used as a template for the program. Gilbertson believes other manufacturers will be similarly amenable in other states.

From that point, Hurd worked with contractor representatives to flesh out the details.

“Our objective was for students to explore and have the excitement of getting their hands on the equipment,” he said. “We wanted them to have a better understanding of the construction industry and get to meet people and network.”

Build Montana consists of 80 hours of course work that takes place between January and May. Students meet every other week for 2 hours a day at either the distributor’s workplace or the contractor’s work site.

STEP SIX. DECIDE WHO DOES WHAT.

Each participating company will have to allocate staff to support the program. Decide who will lead work-based learning sessions and coordinate career experiences with the contractor. Hurd estimates that he spends 15-20 hours a week on Build Montana when the course is in session. “We are lucky that we have a large staff and that people are understanding, but it is definitely a balance.”





STEP SEVEN. ADDRESS THE LEGAL ISSUES.

Age and insurance are two legal matters that must be handled. Are students under the age of 18 allowed in workplaces in your state? Laws vary by state. Montana was able to pass legislation to lower the age to 16.

You also have to determine insurance coverage for the students. Are they covered by school district insurance or the dealer/contractor? In Montana, if students are participating in an unpaid internship, they are covered by the school district and not the dealer/contractor.

STEP EIGHT. MAKE STUDENTS HAPPY!

This one is easy; the students are seriously stoked to get their hands on heavy construction equipment!

"I was really excited; just the fact that I was able to get my hands on excavators and skid steers," said student Olivia Parker. "I learned skills and met a lot of good people. It was a great learning experience."

If you think it's too much to take on, read this and we'll change your mind.

No doubt that starting a program such as this involves a huge commitment of money and time, but every person involved in Build Montana says it was absolutely worth the effort. "MCA Executive Director David Smith said we were building the airplane and flying it at the same time. It is an investment, but well worth it. You will never regret getting involved."

Hurd recommends just starting a conversation with one or two other industry contacts. "If you can get somebody excited, then you'll just start working through it," he said.

Another point Hurd makes is that by the time you attend career fairs for those who have attended college or trade schools, you're too late because the students are already interested in something else and often have multiple offers.

Gilbertson believes that industry members are already spending time

and money on the issue as it is, visiting colleges, talking to recruiters and training staff after you hire them. "If we as a company recruit very aggressively, we may get two or three kids interested," he said. "But if we all band together, we can build a pipeline of 40-50 kids in our area. None of us knows how to do this alone, and there is nothing in high schools to open their eyes to what our industry looks like."

And that's really the crux of the issue. "We need teachers and parents as allies instead of actively working against us. But when they see our stories of success, it really opens their eyes to the possibilities our industry brings." Gilbertson adds. "Teachers see 300-400 kids every day for nine months a year," he says. "They know the type of people we are looking for; we just have to build a relationship with them to make this happen."

Once these programs are placed in the education system, they're there to stay. "The question isn't 'Are we doing this next year?' it's 'What are we doing next year?'" Gilbertson says.

For many students, the only barrier to participating is learning about the program. "These students just do not know about these opportunities," Hurd says. ***"It is incredibly rewarding when they say, 'I never would've known about any of this if it hadn't been for Build Montana.'" Give students the option, and they will come.***

STEP NINE: DON'T FORGET TO RECRUIT.

Once your program is established, you'll want to advertise it at every opportunity. The companies involved in Build Montana take turns giving presentations in schools during October and November. This year, 12 sessions will be held at high schools in the Billings area. They can be quite impactful; four students went straight to the counselors after one recent presentation.

The primary focus for these sessions is juniors and seniors, although Hurd says seventh and eighth graders are targeted as well, but in the spring.

STEP TEN: SWIM IN YOUR SUCCESS.

Everyone we interviewed for this report ran out of positive adjectives for describing how successful the program has been.

"So far, we have had plenty of room for students, but we're coming to the point where we will have more interest than room to accommodate them," Hurd says.

"Looking back to where we were in 2020, we have made significant progress," Houser says. "On a weekly basis, I get calls from across the state asking 'How can we be a Build Montana school?' It has truly exceeded our wildest expectations, and we're having a blast with it."

Gilbertson says RDO has gotten a lot of exposure as a result of its involvement in the program. "It's personally gratifying for our team, and also incredibly impactful for our community."

BUILD MONTANA COORDINATOR ROLE

The MCA Education Foundation currently has Rob Cook in the role of Build Montana coordinator. It is a contracted position, and Cook's primary job is to start conversations with prospective schools and districts, and then also assist as a liaison to help launch new programs.

Here is an overview of his responsibilities:

- Build relationships with students, teachers and administrators.
- Create partnerships between local contractors and dealers to engage with schools. Provide the resources and messaging to help build those relationships.
- Represent the industry at school-based events and teacher, administrator and school board association meetings.
- Engage with the Montana Association of Career Technical Educators. Engage with and support larger community events.
- Represent Build Montana at Digger Days; Missoula Under Construction; Yellowstone Dig-It Days.
- Engage with Montana School Counselors Association.
- Engage with the Office of Public Instruction-CTE division.
- Evaluate and help continuously improve the Build Montana program.
- Work with the MCA marketing director to ensure Build Montana activities and events are promoted in local communities.
- Participate in workforce development workgroups (such as chambers of commerce) throughout Montana, and represent the MCA, MCAEF and MEDA in community discussions on workforce needs and strategies.
- Together with MCA staff, develop and implement plans for ongoing financial sustainability of Build Montana.

VISIT WWW.BUILD-MONTANA.ORG

The MCA built a phenomenal website for Build Montana that has reams of information about the program and the construction industry as a whole. There is information for contractors, educators, parents and students.

