



Mike Feinberg on the Need for Trades–Based Instruction

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Wages in the competitive U.S. skilled labor market rose by more than 20% between the first quarter of 2020 and 2024 — and with an aging workforce, the need for new employees in the field could intensify in the coming years, according to a McKinsey & Company analysis.

The company’s research suggests hiring activity for several critical skilled labor proficiencies — including welder, construction laborer, and electrician roles — could be more than 20 times higher than the projected annual increase in new net jobs through 2032.

Programs such as WorkTexas, a nonprofit initiative launched in 2020, address the growing demand for employees with trade–related abilities.

WorkTexas offers training opportunities for Houston–area teens, who can simultaneously earn a high school degree, and adults, who can obtain career–oriented skills by taking evening courses. Co–founder Mike Feinberg says most high school and adult program participants attend for free.

Initially, WorkTexas offered welding, carpentry, construction, auto tech, and residential and commercial electrical certification–related instruction.

“We still train in those fields,” Feinberg says, “We’ve since added [courses on] plumbing and HVAC and building maintenance; [commercial] truck driving; child development associate [work]; [being a] medical assistant; [crane and] rigging; warehouse [management]; logistics, [and] culinary [skills].”

Ongoing Support

Mike Feinberg says the input employers who’ve partnered with WorkTexas have contributed helps differentiate it from other training programs. More than 100 companies in various industries have helped shape WorkTexas’ curriculum.

As a result, program participants learn practical, applicable skills — and companies that operate in the area gain access to a pool of highly qualified candidates.

“We are employer–focused,” Feinberg says. “Our mission is to help people get [and] keep jobs — and advance in careers.”

Once program graduates obtain employment, WorkTexas remains in contact with them for at least five years.

“We’re not just looking at how the students are doing with us this year,” Mike Feinberg says. “We’re interested in what [their situation] looks like, in terms of career contentment — and especially in terms of earning power and creating sustainable lives for themselves, their families and future generations.”

Mike Feinberg on Well–Rounded Workforce Preparation

While pursuing a degree at a four–year college or university is one potential path students can choose to take after high school, it’s not the only type of learning experience employers may value, according to a survey conducted by the nonprofit American Student Assistance organization.

More than two–thirds—68%—believe in proactively hiring candidates without a degree; 72% say they don’t view a degree as a reliable indication of a candidate’s skills.

Today, many employers are looking for workers who can take on trade–related job responsibilities. Feinberg says many have also expressed a desire for other proficiencies, such as the ability to be responsible, communicative, and engaged.

To position program participants for success in the workplace, WorkTexas’ instruction touches on soft skills in addition to information about industry–specific carpentry, welding, and other competencies.” The technical skills are about 30% of what the employers want,” Feinberg says. “The other 70% all say the exact same thing: ‘We need more welders who can lay a bead, electricians who can bend conduit — but what we really need is people who get to work on time; people who can work on a team.’ That’s what everyone needs and wants — so we teach it.”

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February 9, 2025



In Houston, Texas, the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department provides a number of community-based intervention strategies — including educational programs for young adults who have been placed in a county-operated juvenile institution, been expelled or are seeking an alternative to the traditional high school experience.

In addition to receiving core academic curriculum-based instruction, young people who are or previously have been involved in the justice system can take vocational education courses at the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department's The Opportunity Center campus.

The instruction is provided by WorkTexas, a nonprofit job training program launched in 2020. Participants can obtain both a GED and the skills to pursue a career as a child development



associate, plumber — or performing carpentry, commercial electrical, HVAC or masonry work.

“They’re working towards their academics for half of the day; and the other half, they’re in occupational skills classes,” says Yazmin Guerra, Harris County Director of Workforce Development for Harris County.

Tailored Tutelage

WorkTexas conferred with area employers to develop the skills-based course content and ensure what students learn will be relevant to the local job market.

“We are employer-focused,” [WorkTexas co-founder Mike Feinberg](#) says. “Our mission [is] to help people get jobs, keep jobs, [and] advance careers.”

Course instructors have hired program graduates — who can be extremely loyal employees, due to the support and encouragement they received, according to Vanessa Ramirez, who co-founded WorkTexas with [Mike Feinberg](#).

“That’s because they were in their classes, building trust,” Ramirez says. “Community partners that work with justice-involved youth are the type of employer we need. We can’t work with the one-strike-you’re-out-and-you’re-fired [mentality]; [students] are going to make those mistakes because they’re unlearning unhealthy habits and learning new ones.”

While the classes held at The Opportunity Center were initially the same 11-week duration as the courses offered at WorkTexas’ other Houston location, program organizers decided to alter the format at The Opportunity Center.

“We learned the students there needed something different,” Guerra says. “The students needed to explore the concepts, be more engaged and work with their hands and do creative things. We [created] create mini classes so the students can start getting exposed to the trades.”

Live Lessons

The hands-on training participants receive at The Opportunity Center, Guerra says, is a critical part of the program.

“[With] the high school student population at The Opportunity Center during the day, we experience a lot of truancy,” she says. “We experienced the youth definitely wanting to get engaged and start working with their hands early on.”

To ensure the instruction will ultimately be effective, program organizers work to provide practical, informative and interactive learning experiences.

“We vet the instructors to make sure they’re able to relate to the student — to have conversations, so they’re not reading a PowerPoint, or being lectured on how to behave or do X, Y and Z,” Guerra



says. "The instructor is modeling; and they're picking up on those things."

CALIFORNIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

September 19, 2025

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Mike Feinberg and Other WorkTexas Officials Explain Why Support Outside of the Classroom Is Critical for Skills Training Success

By California Business Journal Editorial Staff

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WorkTexas provides instruction to help young people and adults enter a number of in-demand fields — such as welding, carpentry and construction, plumbing, and building maintenance.

After the nonprofit program launched in 2020, its leadership found some participants needed other assistance, in addition to its skills-based training,

according to Yazmin Guerra, workforce development leader for WorkTexas and the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department.

“We know our students need transportation; that’s been one of the biggest things we’ve found — and childcare,” Guerra says. “People need [both] to be able to go to work.”

To help WorkTexas provide additional assistance to its participants, co-founder Vanessa Ramirez began reaching out to a number of organizations that offer services she thought students might benefit from to learn what their referral process involved.

Today, WorkTexas partners with multiple entities to help program participants obtain help that they may need — including WorkFaith Connection, which helps provide soft skills-based instruction, and the Wesley Community Center, which supplies assistance with financial literacy.

“Workforce Solutions is another one of our partners; our students who are eligible qualify for funding for scholarships; support services, such as transportation to get to and from training; tools they need for training,” Guerra says. “We partner with the Houston Food Bank to address food insecurity; Journey Through Life for behavioral health; Legacy [Community Health] for medical needs. We are open to establishing as many partners as we identify are needed to address the various needs of our students to help them keep their jobs and advance in careers.”

Further Encouragement from Mike Feinberg and WorkTexas

Using federal and local funding and public-private partnerships, WorkTexas has also been able to provide daytime care for more than 60 children of program participants and other community members.

“It’s a childcare desert in the areas we train,” Guerra says. “The majority of the people [here] are low-income, so they would qualify; and the

[WorkTexas] team members support the parent in completing the necessary applications to qualify.”

After WorkTexas students finish their skills training, program officials make an effort to stay in touch with them — often for an extended period of time.

“We’re not just looking at how the students are doing with us this year,” **WorkTexas co-founder Mike Feinberg** says. “We make a commitment to follow our students for at least five years. We’re interested in what that looks like, in terms of career contentment; and especially in terms of earning power and creating sustainable lives for themselves, their families and future generations.”

At times, he says, the communication can feel a bit like job coaching — including providing either technical or emotional support.

“We are proactively reaching out to all of them every six months [to ask] are you still in the same job? Are you looking for a different job? What’s your salary? Do you need any help?” **Mike Feinberg** says. “We’re also reacting when they call in and [say], ‘I just had a fight with my boss,’ [or] ‘I don’t like the job; there’s another opening across the street — do you think I should apply for it?’ We’re having those conversations with people, too.”