September 20, 2013

The Honorable Todd Rokita
Chairman
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Carolyn McCarthy
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Rokita and Ranking Member McCarthy:

Thank you for holding today’s subcommittee hearing on “Preparing Today’s Students for Tomorrow’s Jobs: A Discussion on Career and Technical Education and Training Programs.” The Independent Electrical Contractors (IEC) appreciates this subcommittee’s attention to the need to improve access to and emphasis on career and technical education and training in primary and secondary schools. We respectfully submit the following comments for the hearing record, which represent our thoughts on this matter.

I. The electrical contracting industry needs to fill good paying jobs.

IEC is a national trade association representing more than 3,000 merit shop electrical and systems contracting companies employing over 100,000 individuals across 56 chapters. Electrical workers are well paid, with the median income of electricians being over $48,000 per year.

The industry is recovering and the demand for electricians is up. However, our current workforce is reaching retirement age and many electricians left the industry during the recent recession. We are having difficulty finding the qualified individuals we need to fill those positions. Projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicate that our industry’s growing shortage may rise to a deficit of over 150,000 workers by the year 2020.

II. IEC is a longstanding leader in educating the next generation of qualified, successful electrical workers. But, entry level workers must be properly prepared.

The electrical industry is highly technical. Contractor personnel have to be able to conduct complex circuit calculations, read and interpret complex technical specifications and building codes, evaluate field conditions, and command knowledge of basic physics, mechanics, and environmental issues to design and install workable electrical systems. Electricians must have advanced education, which a four year college degree does not provide. They must have a strong K-12 education and obtain specialized training. Such training can be provided through an unstructured program of study through a community college or trade school, or through a rigorous U.S. Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship program such as is conducted by IEC.
In order to successfully enter an electrical education program – either through a registered apprenticeship or through community college or trade schools – students must possess several important qualities.

Entry-level students must have a strong grounding in STEM subjects including basic and applied mathematics through at least Algebra I and basic physical sciences, as well as proficiency in reading and analytics. Further, they must have received basic life skills training and basic employability skills training.

Successful candidates must be able to conduct some physical tasks, such as climbing ladders and lifting at least 50 pounds on a regular basis. They must be mechanically inclined and able to work with their hands. And, most importantly, they must be interested in pursuing a career in the electrical industry and be willing to take direction and learn.

IEC’s electrical education program is equipped to provide students with the advanced education necessary.

III. High schools must increase their emphasis on building basic STEM and employability skills to prepare students for both college and career entry.

Unfortunately, our education system is myopically focused on preparing students for a four-year college degree. As a result, far too many leave high school without basic STEM education, life skills, and employability training. We are concerned that our system is so focused on churning out college graduates that high schools have excluded teaching the basics necessary for life and for any occupation. On a national basis, we see young people coming in our educational program requiring significant remediation to bolster their basic math skills and reading. At the same time, high schools have cut funding to labs, workshops, and applied learning programs. Students are leaving school with limited mechanical ability and technical skills necessary to pursue many successful careers.

IEC firmly believes that advanced education takes a variety of forms – and is not limited to a college degree. In fact, IEC is a believer in lifelong learning. Nationally, IEC’s registered electrical apprenticeship education program has been evaluated by American Council on Education (ACE) and is recognized for 37 semester hours towards college credit. At the local level, a number of IEC chapter educational programs have individually negotiated articulation agreements with local community colleges. IEC also strongly supports the Registered Apprenticeship-College Coalition recently established by Departments of Education and Labor as a stepping stone for people that want to continue on in their quest for lifelong learning.

We believe that schools need to increase their emphasis on education for a career, rather than education for the sake of college preparation. The education system needs to recognize that a four-year college is not the best investment for every individual. High school education should be broad enough to provide a pathway to either college or the skilled trades. Perhaps most importantly, high school teachers and advisors need to make students aware of all career options available to them, recognizing that students will likely hold multiple jobs over their working career and will need to pursue lifelong learning.

IV. The path forward will require both sufficient funding investments in our nation’s education system and support from both public and private partnerships.
A July 2013 report by the Urban Institute entitled “Innovations and Future Directors for Workforce Development in the Post-Recession Era” highlights the need for the establishment of career pathways, industry-recognized credentials, work-based learning approaches such as apprenticeship, the need for soft skills training, and the need for establishment of partnerships between government and industry designed to address these needs. IEC believes such partnerships are absolutely critical in supporting career and technical education. SkillsUSA and 4H are two examples of important skills-building organizations that teach professionalism and self-pride while also preparing students for careers in highly technical trades such as electrical contracting.

Further, the decision by many schools to eliminate their career and technical education programs is often cost-driven and skewed by incentives to drive students to college. Lab facilities and equipment used to train students in technical skills require dedicated space, unlike traditional multipurpose classrooms. Reauthorization of the Perkins Act and increased appropriations for career and technical education programs in schools is undoubtedly integral to improving the skills-building and training offered at the high school level. In order to build the skills and the workforce that our industry needs, sustaining both Perkins and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding is necessary – further, support for one should not be to the exclusion of the other.

IEC has many more recommendations for improving partnerships between training programs and institutions such as community colleges, which we would be happy to provide in greater detail to this subcommittee.

V. Conclusion

In closing, the focus of our nation’s K-12 system needs to be redirected in a way that ensures students are adequately prepared with the basic academic education, life skills, and employability training needed to enter post-secondary education regardless of the specific career path they choose. As part of this, IEC strongly supports Career and Technical Education (applied learning) not only for those individuals that may not be suited for college but for those that preselect a technical career path, and to teach rising graduates integral basic life and employability skills.

Sincerely,

Alexis Moch
Vice President, Government Affairs
Independent Electrical Contractors