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PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
Built in Pennsylvania: Workforce Development in the Trades
March 19, 2026 New Castle, PA

Introduction

Chair David H. Rowe, Representative Marla Brown, Members of the House Republican Policy Committee and Nancy Nilson, Executive Director, Policy Committee.

My name is Julie Michael Smith and I have the pleasure of serving as the first Coalition Manager of the Lawrence Mercer Manufacturers Coalition (LMMC).

I thank you for the invitation to testify at *"Built in Pennsylvania: Workforce Development in the Trades"* hearing. On behalf of LMMC, I appreciate the opportunity to share the priorities, challenges and opportunities of our membership. The Committee's mission to craft and implement policies and support a business and education environment that sustains and grows manufacturing in the Commonwealth by engaging industry is commendable.

I also want to extend appreciation to Representative Brown for her commitment to focusing on the needs and opportunities of Western Pennsylvania's manufacturing sector, which is the leading driver of our region and critical to the viability of our communities, residents and economy.

About LMMC

LMMC was formally organized in 2024 after a core group of committed regional manufacturers, energized by Anna Barendsfeld, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, Ellwood, committed to the formation of an industry partnership for Lawrence and Mercer counties. An "industry partnership" is an organization led and driven by industry leaders who identify its priorities and work with educators and workforce organizations to address their challenges. Seeded with invaluable support and guidance from West Central Job Partnership, manufacturing, education, and economic development leaders participated in a robust strategic planning process. Six manufacturers committed as "Keystone" founders – Ellwood, Berner International, Blair Strip Steel, GW Becker Crane, Hall Industries and Wheatland Steel Processing – and formed the inaugural board led by Anna. With WCJP's support, we successfully won a US Department of Labor grant for almost \$1 million and \$236,000 from PA's Industry Partnership grant, managed by PA Workforce Development Board which has been supportive and encouraging to LMMC. LMMC now has 31 members with half being manufacturers while others are valued partners such as Forward Lawrence and PNDC, our state-designated regional economic organizations, CTEs, Butler County Community College and Penn College of Technology.

Manufacturers' Challenges

Manufacturing faces dual challenges that are critical to near and long-term workforce development: **1) Widespread misconceptions and lack of awareness about modern manufacturing careers** prevent talent

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from entering the industry; 2) **Misalignment between workforce training programs and manufacturing needs** creates a skills gap that leaves employers unable to fill critical positions with qualified talent. Current training programs often fail to reflect specific technical competencies, digital, career and job readiness skills needed, and education can lack agility to adapt as technologies and processes evolve, leaving workers unprepared for emerging roles in automation, advanced manufacturing, and Industry 4.0 applications. These challenges are amplified by retirements, organic growth and new businesses. These compounding issues result in prolonged job vacancies, reduced productivity and increased training costs for manufacturers who must develop skills internally.

Our Priorities

LMMC manufacturing members are laser focused on two priorities: 1) **increase visibility of manufacturing career pathways** as rewarding and appealing opportunities with an emphasis on youth/young adult and 2) develop new and strengthen existing career pathways and workforce pipelines by working with education and training providers to **ensure training programs align with manufacturers' needs** and industry-recognized credentials.

This testimony will focus on our first priority, **increasing the visibility of manufacturing career pathways**.

The youth and young adult population is the largest segment of the recruitable talent pool. Our two counties have approximately 25,000 residents age 15–24; 50% are 18-24 with many not in school or employed full-time. The region graduates almost 2,000 students annually and statistics show approximately 50% pursuing higher education, 5% entering the military and 10-15% enrolling in technical training, leaving up to 35% unknown or undecided. These "opportunity youth" are NEET (not in education, employment, or training) and typically have household incomes below state averages, higher poverty rates and often have received limited career guidance. Studies note that individuals ages 18–24 are least likely to consider manufacturing with due to these **misperceptions about manufacturing** careers: (1) low-paying jobs; (2) dirty, dangerous, physically hard; 3) limited opportunities for advancement. Yet, the region has job openings driven by retirement, turnover, and reshoring for production, technical, and advanced manufacturing. Manufacturing is the region's second largest employer (15.6% of workforce) and earnings of approximately \$69,000 (average \$53,000). The region's average age is 45 - the same for manufacturing employees – which represents almost 41% of the manufacturing workforce. The impact regionally is clear: manufacturing will have a strong period of high-volume, skills-critical hiring over the next decade.

LMMC is presenting two cases with recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

1) The Case for Investing in Manufacturing Career Awareness for All Influencers

Pennsylvania has made meaningful investments in career and technical education. The gap is not in programs—it is in persuasion.

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Career decisions are not made by young people alone. They are shaped by the adults who surround them: parents who weigh in at the dinner table, coaches who see potential and redirect it, mentors who offer honest guidance, and out-of-school time staff who work with young people during hours largely untouched by workforce development strategy. These are the voices young people trust most. And overwhelmingly, those voices still associate manufacturing with the industries many adults left behind—physically demanding, economically precarious, and socially diminished. No in-school program can fully overcome the skepticism a young person absorbs at home and in their community.

Parents and caregivers are the single most powerful force in a young person's career orientation. When they understand that modern manufacturing careers offer starting wages of \$18–\$25 per hour, employer-supported credentials, and clear advancement pathways, that kitchen table conversation changes. When they do not, it works against every investment the Commonwealth has made downstream. **Coaches, mentors, and out-of-school time staff** occupy a uniquely trusted position in adolescent development, particularly for young people disengaged from traditional academic pathways. These adults already have relationships and access. What they lack is accurate, compelling information about what modern manufacturing offers and the confidence to raise it as a credible option. **Out-of-school time programs** reach the young people Pennsylvania most needs in this pipeline: economically disadvantaged youth, first-generation students, and those least likely to have family connections to modern manufacturing.

The return on this investment is disproportionately high. A single informed parent influences every career conversation in that household for years. A coach who champions manufacturing pathways shapes the thinking of dozens of young people each season. Changing adult perception produces durable, community-embedded support that no one-time student-facing event can replicate.

Pennsylvania has invested significantly in the back end of the manufacturing workforce pipeline. Those investments will continue to underperform as long as the front end—the beliefs, expectations, and encouragement that move young people toward manufacturing in the first place—is left unaddressed. The most cost-effective action the Commonwealth can take is to ensure that the trusted adults shaping young people's futures are equipped with an accurate picture of what modern manufacturing offers. The infrastructure of trusted adult relationships already exists in every community - it needs to be activated.

Policy Recommendations: Manufacturing Career Awareness

Pennsylvania's manufacturing workforce pipeline will continue to underperform as long as career awareness remains a school-only strategy. The following recommendations target the systemic gaps:

Establish a dedicated Manufacturing Career Awareness Grant Program that funds regional initiatives targeting not just students but ALL career influencers — parents, caregivers, coaches, mentors, and out-of-school time staff. Priority funding should go to economically distressed and Appalachian-designated communities where manufacturing employment is concentrated, and pipeline gaps are most acute.

Expand PASmart eligibility to include career awareness activities reaching career influencers outside the school building. Regional workforce development boards and industry partnerships are already positioned

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to administer these funds and bring the employer credibility that makes awareness programming compelling and current.

Create a Manufacturing Career Ambassador Program that trains and deploys working manufacturing professionals to speak authentically in schools, community organizations, and parent engagement settings. Ambassadors should reflect the full diversity of the manufacturing workforce, with deliberate recruitment of women, young adults and other underrepresented populations. A modest employer-reimbursement mechanism makes sustained participation feasible.

Launch a sustained statewide public awareness campaign that reframes manufacturing for Pennsylvania families — countering outdated perceptions with accurate, current narratives about modern manufacturing environments, wages, and career pathways. The campaign should be delivered through multi channels and developed in partnership with manufacturers.

Explore a Manufacturing Career Awareness Per-Pupil Funding Incentive, drawing on Ohio's Career Awareness Per-Pupil Funding model, that rewards school districts and CTCs for documenting meaningful manufacturing career awareness activities at the middle school level — creating a structural motivation for early exposure rather than leaving it to local discretion.

2) The Case for Investing in High School Manufacturing Work-Based Learning (and Earning)

There is no career awareness strategy that is more powerful than direct experience. A high school student who spends a semester working alongside a CNC machinist or quality technician does not need to be convinced that manufacturing offers a real career. They have lived it. They have earned a paycheck, built skills, and developed a personal connection to an employer, the kind of relationship that turns into a job offer. For young people from economically disadvantaged households and those without family connections to industrial careers, a paid work-based learning (WBL) placement is often the most direct path to economic mobility available to them.

Most manufacturers want to develop the next generation of their workforce. The barriers to offering WBL consistently are practical and predictable: supervision burden on lean production teams, uncertainty about liability and OSHA compliance, concerns about student readiness, and the complexity of coordinating with school partners. These are not insurmountable problems. They are exactly the kind of friction that targeted public investment is designed to reduce.

Policy Recommendations: Work-Based Learning

Pennsylvania's existing framework — Act 158's CTE graduation pathway, the Future Ready PAIndex Industry-Based Learning Indicator, and PASmart internship reimbursement — provides a strong foundation for WBL. What is missing is the scalable, sustained funding, and employer-facing support to bring small and mid-size manufacturers into the system in numbers that match the workforce need.

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Establish a Manufacturing WBL Wage Reimbursement Program that reimburses employers for 50% of student wages. Offsetting the direct cost of bringing on a student who is not yet at full productivity is an effective lever for increasing participation, particularly for small and mid-size employers.

Create a Tax Credit for WBL Participation based on placements or wages. Unlike one-time grants, a transferable tax credit creates a year-over-year incentive for manufacturers to institutionalize WBL as a regular business practice.

Develop Employer Guidance on WBL Compliance covering insurance, OSHA requirements for minors, and age-restricted task management through PDE and L&I in partnership with regional intermediaries. Many manufacturers overestimate the legal and regulatory complexity of hosting a student. Plain-language, sector-specific guidance delivered through trusted regional channels significantly reduces risk aversion before it becomes a barrier.

Establish Pre-WBL Readiness Standards ensuring students understand workplace norms, safety fundamentals, and technical vocabulary. Better-prepared students produce better employer experience, strengthening the employer relationship and building trust that sustains WBL programs.

Together these recommendations address the full range of barriers that prevent small and mid-size manufacturers from participating in work-based learning at scale — financial, operational, regulatory, and relational. Pennsylvania has the policy architecture. These investments would activate it.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania's manufacturing sector faces a generational workforce crisis that cannot be solved by training programs alone. The pipeline begins long before a young person enrolls in a CTE program or applies for an apprenticeship — it begins in the beliefs formed at home, in the conversations had with trusted adults, and in the firsthand experiences that either open or close a young person's sense of what is possible for them. Career awareness investments that reach parents, caregivers, coaches, and community influencers build the cultural and social foundation that makes every downstream workforce investment more effective. Work-based learning placements convert that awareness into conviction, competence, and direct employer connection — producing the kind of durable career commitment that classroom instruction alone cannot generate. Without both, Pennsylvania will continue to fund the back end of a pipeline whose front end remains broken — investing in training infrastructure for young people who were never persuaded, inspired, or given the opportunity to see themselves in a manufacturing career in the first place. The Commonwealth's manufacturers are ready to grow, ready to hire, and increasingly unable to find the workers they need. Closing that gap is not only a workforce imperative — it is an economic survival strategy for the communities, regions, and industries that have defined Pennsylvania's working identity for generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your leadership in this important work.

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