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Opinion: Let's make Chicago the nation's vocational training capital

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The de facto investment banking capital of the U.S. is New York City. The technology capital is Silicon Valley. Which city can command the title of the nation's vocational training capital?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 8 million skilled-labor jobs were lost during the pandemic. Approximately half have been filled, leaving almost 4 million vacancies in industries responsible for transportation, construction and mechanical needs nationwide.

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The U.S. Department of Labor reports the 2022 unionization rate, 10.1%, is the lowest on record. In 1983, the first year union data was available, the union membership rate was 20.1% with 17.7 million union workers.

Further amplifying the labor shortage problem is that 40% of the 12 million people in the skilled trades workforce are over the age of 45, with nearly half of those workers over 55 and less than 9% of workers age 19 to 24 entering the trades, according to an analysis by PeopleReady last year.

Meanwhile, Faraday Careers reports the average salary in Illinois for a journeyman electrician is \$81,470; \$91,210 for plumbers; \$57,250 for HVAC technicians; and \$62,468 for carpenters. These are clearly not minimum-wage jobs but solidly middle-class careers that are in extremely high demand.

In 2013, Chicago closed 50 public schools, primarily in South and West side neighborhoods, where unemployment rates currently range between 10% and 36%, according to the city's Department of Health & Human Services. Most of these closed schools remain unutilized and are literally in the backyards of our fellow citizens who, along with their communities, are suffering from a crisis of economic decline.

Neighborhood-based vocational training is at the intersection of the interests of numerous cohorts. Chicago has the opportunity to channel community reinvestment and private

foundation capital; to utilize the administration of Chicago Public Schools; to incorporate the knowledge and support of an aging organized labor membership; to repurpose the shuttered schools located in Chicago's most vulnerable neighborhoods; and to provide a hand up where it is needed most.

Just as tax-increment financing has been an effective strategy to jump-start economic development on the promise of enhanced future taxes, a similar lens can be applied here, where the costs of educating a skilled tradesperson would be quickly offset by the income taxes paid, not to mention the financial support this solution would receive from not-for-profit and corporate community reinvestment programs.

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With the soaring cost of college, ongoing student loan issues and valuable underutilized resources, the time to seize this opportunity is now. This is not a moonshot hope but an achievable community- and industry-based solution.

There will always be those who say something can't be done or that there are too many moving parts. But Chicago has a history of making stuff. For an incoming city administration seeking new solutions to old problems, I suggest the goal of establishing Chicago as the nation's vocational training capital. We have the tools. We just need people who know how to use them.

Doug Imber is co-founder and president of Essex Realty Group.

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