



**Zach Boren Apprenticeships for America Written Testimony for
The House Committee on Small Business**

**Full Committee Hearing: “Career and Technical Education: Developing the
Future of Main Street Success”**

Chairman Williams, Ranking Member Velázquez, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on how we can strengthen America’s Main Streets by investing in a well-trained workforce through Career and Technical Education (CTE) – and by ensuring CTE is directly connected to Registered Apprenticeships that allow students and workers to earn while they learn.

My name is Zach Boren, and I serve as Senior Vice President of Apprenticeships for America (AFA), the national industry association advancing apprenticeship as America’s first-choice talent strategy. With more than 700 members across industry, government, labor, and education, AFA connects policy to practice – helping employers of all sizes launch and scale high-quality apprenticeships while advancing the infrastructure and funding needed to support the nation’s apprenticeship system. Our north star is to reach 4 million active apprentices over the next decade, putting the United States on par with global leaders such as England, Germany, Switzerland, and Australia.

Our nonpartisan leadership has helped advance meaningful state and federal reforms, including Maryland’s 2025 RAISE Act – a landmark pay-for-success apprenticeship incentive model. That work, alongside new [research](#) and advocacy, has helped drive broader federal momentum, including the U.S. Department of Labor’s recent \$145 million investment using performance-based funding to expand apprenticeships nationwide.

For over a decade, I served as a civil servant working to grow apprenticeships across multiple administrations – from President George W. Bush through President Trump – at the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration. In my final role as Director of Registered Apprenticeship and



Policy, we partnered with the nation's largest unions, industry associations, and leading employers — including Google, Siemens, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and Automotive Service Excellence — to scale high-quality apprenticeship programs nationwide. During that time, national apprenticeship participation increased by more than 160 percent, National Apprenticeship Week was launched and now marks its 12th year, veteran access to GI Bill benefits was streamlined, and Federal program startup paperwork was reduced by 70 percent. I also worked closely with State Apprenticeship Agencies across the country, giving me firsthand insight into both what works — and where outdated laws, regulations, and political processes continue to hamper growth and business opportunity. While considerable progress has been made, much more reform is still needed to fully unlock the potential of apprenticeships for American small businesses.

Beyond my Federal service, I have worked directly with small businesses as an apprenticeship intermediary — recruiting employers, designing high-quality programs, and helping companies across IT, energy, automotive, healthcare, and the construction trades launch apprenticeship programs that meet real workforce needs.

But my connection to apprenticeships is also a family story. I grew up in a blue-collar rich family. Our small Indiana town was the kind of place where you knew what people did for a living because you saw it every day outside our houses and in the trucks parked in the driveway. I am the son of a proud apprenticeship graduate. In the 1970s, my dad, Ken Boren, completed a meter technician apprenticeship with Northern Indiana Public Service Company in partnership with the United Steelworkers. That hands-on education didn't just lead to a job — it built a trade that sustained our family and powered our American Dream for more than 50 years.

That is what apprenticeships represent for millions of American families — and what they can mean for employers searching for skilled workers, and for workers seeking stability and opportunity in a rapidly changing labor market.

We are at a pivotal moment for workers and small businesses alike, and a college-for-all strategy alone is no longer enough to meet our hometown



talent needs. Instead, an old idea — earn-and-learn apprenticeships — is experiencing a renaissance and should stand alongside higher education as a core pathway to opportunity. Registered Apprenticeships, a system that has operated for more than 80 years, can — if appropriately invested in — unleash a new wave of talent on Main Street and provide small businesses with the skilled workforce they need to compete and thrive.

CTE is increasingly where that journey begins — giving students hands-on skills and industry exposure — while Registered Apprenticeship is where those skills are transformed into paid training, industry-recognized credentials, and long-term careers.

Registered Apprenticeship — Built for Main Street Employers

Small businesses are the backbone of the American economy — accounting for nearly half of private-sector employment. Yet small employers consistently report that hiring and retaining qualified workers is one of their greatest challenges (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Small Business Index, 2024). That’s what makes apprenticeship such a powerful public-private partnership. It provides small businesses with a structured, industry-driven framework to develop skilled homegrown talent aligned to their real-time needs.

Registered Apprenticeships combine paid, on-the-job training with structured curriculum, allowing workers to earn while they learn. Unlike college students taking on debt, apprentices are paid by their sweat, and the average graduate earns about [\\$80,000 annually —exceeding entry-level bachelor’s degree earners](#). According to the evaluation of the American Apprenticeship Initiative, participants’ [earnings increased by nearly 50%](#) after completing a registered apprentice program, compared to their prior earnings.

Increasingly, the continuum of work-based learning begins in high school CTE programs and flows directly into Registered Apprenticeships with small businesses. For example, in Central Campus in Des Moines, students now participate in apprenticeships in multiple occupations — earning competitive wages and gaining on-the-job experience while still in high school. This is



exactly the kind of seamless CTE-to-career pathway that expands options for students and strengthens local workforces.

Today, nearly [680,000 Americans](#) are training for jobs through the Registered Apprenticeship system – more enrollment than the [nine largest public universities combined](#) – yet apprenticeship receives only a fraction of government funding for education. Just [0.3%](#) of U.S. workers are apprentices, far below our international competitors [Germany](#) and [England](#). While Registered Apprenticeships have [nearly doubled](#) over the past decade, they remain underutilized relative to their potential.

Meanwhile, Federal policy and funding continue to emphasize a college-for-all approach. For every Federal dollar spent on apprenticeship, [roughly \\$1,000 is spent on higher education](#). Meanwhile, [45 percent of college graduates are underemployed](#), and student loan debt has reached a whopping [\\$1.7 trillion](#) – nearly [\\$38,000 per borrower](#) on average. Apprenticeships offer a proven alternative: strong wages, career mobility, and no student debt.

Our nation’s overemphasis on college leaves too many behind – [one half of Americans](#) won’t attend, complete, or have the financial means to start college. Unfortunately, America’s decades-long college obsession has left us with skill gaps in the skilled trades and technical jobs that have good pay and don’t require a degree. Some projections show that we’re short millions of [electricians](#) and [plumbers](#). These are high-quality, stable jobs: electricians earn a [median of \\$62,000](#), and a New York City union plumber can expect to earn [six figures](#). These careers strengthen local economies and support small business growth.

Employers see returns too – apprenticeships [generate a 144% return on investment](#) with small businesses experiencing the greatest gains. Registered Apprenticeships deliver [higher employee retention](#) compared to all other workforce strategies, and consistently report [strong employer satisfaction](#). Over a lifetime, research shows apprentices earn roughly [\\$300,000 more](#) in wages and benefits than comparable peers. For policymakers, apprenticeships are a [net-positive](#), anti-poverty strategy that reduces



reliance on public assistance, while restoring dignity and purpose through work.

Simply put, apprenticeships are a win for workers, a win for small businesses, and a win for taxpayers.

What Works for Small Businesses: Evidence from the Field

A pilot project I directed — the Small and Medium Business Tech Apprenticeship Project during my time at the Urban Institute — shows exactly how apprenticeships can scale for small businesses when the right supports are in place. We worked with employers across North and South Carolina, many with fewer than 50 employees, to launch and expand tech apprenticeships in fields like software development, IT support, and cybersecurity. Over three years, the project stimulated 275 new apprenticeships and launched a dozen new programs — exceeding expectations for hiring and employer participation.

One example is Technically IT, a small, minority-owned business providing tech services to local companies. Its founder and CEO, Ashley, was drawn to apprenticeships because they allowed her to train local talent while growing her business in a tight labor market. With grant support from Google.org to cover classroom instruction and hands-on technical assistance to design and register the program, she was able to hire apprentices quickly and affordably — saving roughly \$20,000 in education costs while expanding her business.

That experience points to the real “secret sauce” for small business apprenticeships: group sponsors and intermediaries that handle program design, compliance, and training coordination, paired with targeted funding that offsets upfront costs. When those supports exist, small businesses don’t just participate in apprenticeships — they scale them.

North Carolina: A Proven Model for Small Business Apprenticeship Growth

North Carolina has cracked the code for scaling apprenticeships through a group employer model. Today, more than 25 employer groups (i.e., Group



Apprenticeship Sponsors) are collaborating to jointly operate apprenticeship programs with community colleges and high schools — training workers for roles ranging from mechatronics technicians to accounting and tech.

Group apprenticeship sponsors allow multiple employers to share the cost, administration, and infrastructure of apprenticeship programs. These consortia are typically led by industry associations, community colleges, nonprofits, or labor-management partnerships and are designed to meet the workforce needs of specific industries or entire regions. In North Carolina alone, [more than 10 percent of apprentices](#) are now trained through these consortium models across manufacturing, technology, and professional services.

Apprenticeship 2000, a youth apprenticeship program outside Charlotte, has operated and recruited students for more than 30 years. Founded in 1994 by a consortium of Swiss, German, American, and Austrian-based companies, the program allows employers to jointly brand and promote a single, high-quality apprenticeship pathway — much like a respected college brands its degree programs — giving students and families confidence in the rigor, outcomes, and career value of the training.

The program attracts high-performing students who often have college options but choose apprenticeship because of the hands-on experience and direct career pathways it offers. As one apprentice, Jordan Pounds, explained: “I explored my options between going to a four-year university and the apprenticeship program — and the apprenticeship had the most pros.” (Urban Institute, 2021)

For Group Sponsor member companies, like Austrian-headquartered Blum, more than 65 percent of its current technicians are graduates of the program — demonstrating the power of apprenticeship to build loyalty, retention, and a skilled workforce pipeline (Urban Institute, 2021). This is what becomes possible when businesses can access apprenticeships through shared, scalable models.

In North Carolina, and across the country, CTE programs at community colleges and high schools are becoming the front door to Registered



Apprenticeship — aligning coursework directly with employer-designed training so students move seamlessly from classroom to paid, on-the-job learning.

Expand and Incentivize Group Apprenticeship Sponsors to Serve Small Businesses

If Congress wants apprenticeships to scale for small businesses, the most immediate and powerful lever is expanding and strengthening group apprenticeship sponsors — partnerships that design programs, recruit employers, manage registration, coordinate training, and support apprentices. The core challenge in growing apprenticeships is not employer interest; it is the lack of a sustainable financing model for the sponsors that perform the high-cost, high-impact work of building and administering programs.

For small businesses especially, these group sponsors can be the difference between wanting to hire apprentices and actually being able to do it. When sponsors absorb regulatory burden, coordinate training, and provide technical assistance, employers can focus on running their business and training workers on the job. States like North Carolina and [Iowa](#) have demonstrated that consortium models dramatically increase small business participation while maintaining quality and strong outcomes.

Adopt Pay-for-Performance Incentives That Reward Real Apprenticeship Outcomes

To accelerate apprenticeship growth among small businesses, Congress should adopt [Pay-for-Performance incentives](#) that reward verified outcomes — such as apprentice hiring, retention, and successful completion — rather than simply funding activity.

For small employers, the greatest barriers to apprenticeship are not interest or need — they are upfront costs, administrative complexity, and financial risk. Outcome-based funding can directly support group sponsors and apprenticeship intermediaries that recruit small businesses, design programs,



manage compliance, and deliver classroom instruction on their behalf. Instead of asking each small employer to build a program alone, Congress can incentivize shared, scalable models, like those employer consortia in North Carolina, that lower costs and reduce red tape.

This Committee is uniquely positioned to champion it. By authorizing performance-based funding targeted specifically to small business group sponsors – and aligning those incentives with SBA and regional economic development efforts – Congress can ensure public dollars flow only when small businesses hire, train, and retain apprentices.

This model protects taxpayers by paying for results, avoids subsidizing activity that would have occurred anyway, and creates a workforce strategy that small employers can actually access and scale.

Modernize the Apprenticeship System to Reduce Bureaucracy and Speed Employer Participation

The National Apprenticeship Act has not been meaningfully modernized in more than 80 years, and fragmented state processes too often slow employer participation. Excessive and inconsistent registration paperwork – that can exceed 35 pages – delays hiring without improving quality. In some states, apprenticeship councils function as additional bureaucratic layers, creating months-long bottlenecks for small employers ready to train workers.

I have seen this firsthand. In Pennsylvania, as I wrote in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, a small business apprenticeship initiative I helped lead faced significant delays navigating state approval processes. After 10 months and three council meetings, pleading our case, the program was finally approved. The issue was not employer demand or even program quality; it was bureaucratic friction, led by 11 political appointees designed in the state's 1960-era legislation. For small businesses operating on tight margins, delays like these can mean missed contracts, lost candidates, and abandoned apprenticeship plans altogether.



Congress can help modernize this system by establishing clear national approval timelines, standardizing registration paperwork, returning apprenticeship councils to an advisory role, and creating [turnkey occupational standards](#) that allow for faster review. These reforms would dramatically reduce friction while preserving program integrity – ensuring the system works for small employers instead of slowing them down.

Align Federal Education Funding for Earn-And-Learn

Outdated funding structures still favor classroom-only education over proven earn-and-learn models. Veterans using the GI Bill, for example, receive far greater support for college than for apprenticeships – despite apprenticeships delivering strong wages, retention, and employer outcomes.

Veteran apprentices, under the Post 9/11 GI Bill receive a shrinking housing allowance and little else, while college students collect full tuition and generous stipends. In DC, that choice can cost a veteran apprentice nearly \$200,000 in lost benefits (author's calculation) a clear signal that we still value degrees over the trades.

Modernizing these funding streams to reflect today's labor market would expand veterans' access to Registered Apprenticeship and vocational education while helping small businesses meet critical workforce needs.

Unlock Apprenticeship Growth for America's Small Businesses

At their core, these reforms make apprenticeships practical, accessible, and financially workable for small employers. When a small business is ready to invest in training workers, the Federal government and states should enable that decision – not delay it.

By empowering group sponsors, rewarding companies that hire and retain apprentices, reducing unnecessary regulatory barriers, and aligning educational dollars with real workforce demand, Congress can modernize apprenticeship for today's economy. The result would be a system that works not just for our Fortune 500s, like Boeing and Microsoft, but for the small and



mid-sized companies that power our hometowns, like Technically IT in Augusta, Georgia and Blum in Lowesville, North Carolina.

Apprenticeships are one of the most effective anti-poverty strategies we have. They are a first rung on the ladder to the middle class – where Americans can advance through sweat, not student debt – reducing dependence on public assistance and building stronger families and main streets.

And we won't add to the national deficit to get there—just pragmatic investments in our future, rather than borrowing against it. [Few other workforce policies](#) can claim this consistent result across workers, employers, and taxpayers. The evidence is clear: apprenticeships work.