

US House Small Business Committee Testimony

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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Back to School, Back to Startups: Supporting Youth Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurship,
and Workforce Development

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Thank you Chairman Crow, Ranking Member Kim, and the distinguished members of this subcommittee. My name is Jared Ebbing and I am the Community & Economic Development Director for Mercer County, Ohio. Mercer County is a Rural county in West Central Ohio along the Ohio/Indiana border. Mercer County is part of a region in Ohio that is known for its small, homegrown companies involved in everything from advanced manufacturing to ag and food processing. My office works with our many local companies to ensure they have the personnel necessary to continue to grow their business and invest in our area. By doing so, we believe that our businesses, communities, and families will all continue to prosper in the years to come.

The vast majority of the jobs created here in Mercer County can be attributed to small business. While we do have a couple of nationally known larger corporations, most of our companies started right here years ago in someone's basement, garage or out-building with just a handful of workers. The entrepreneurial spirit has always been alive and well in this region as people just know how to make things and have never been afraid of the hard work needed to make it happen. While these businesses haven't really asked for anything more than our local support in their efforts to grow and expand, they are worried about the sustainability of their workforce in the future.

COVID-19 and its impact created an unprecedented new set of challenges for businesses. While larger corporations adjusted utilizing remote work as an option, many small manufacturers had a hard time managing, training, and thus developing their future workforce as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, the "Great Resignation", supply chain issues, increased raw material costs and now hyper *wage* inflation have all compounded their issues making it very difficult for small businesses to manage their operations.

As such, we hear from our companies every day that say even though the work is there, they are struggling to complete it due to their various open positions. So many of these unfilled positions are skilled jobs, meaning they require a high school diploma and *some* form of post-secondary education but not necessarily always a traditional four-year college degree. As a result, companies are looking at apprenticeships and other on-the-job training programs. In order to make this happen, ongoing collaboration among stakeholders at every level is vital to identify best practices, explore new ideas, and implement impactful programs.

I'd like to share one such example of a program that we've implemented to great success. HometownOpportunity.com is an online-based resource aimed at increasing awareness of our many great local careers to our students and families. Our companies are most certainly in need of our local talent, who all too often do not realize these great opportunities exist right here in their own backyard. Furthermore, we are utilizing this resource to make meaningful connections between our emerging workforce and the companies hoping to hire and train them.

We focused our efforts on first making sure students are aware of what our local companies do, what skills are needed and what opportunities exist. Properly educating students on the myriads of options and opportunities to them may sound simple, but it is surprisingly difficult when teenagers' attentions and interests aren't necessarily on their future. Through these career navigation tools, new career-based curriculum within our schools, and the hiring of county-wide career coaches and counselors, an appreciable increase in the awareness among our young people is finally occurring.

With such awareness and new-found interest, students are enrolling in job shadow and pre-apprenticeship opportunities eventually leading them to full apprenticeship programs at our local companies. It's a long process, but once students are aware of what's here, it is so much easier to introduce them to the necessary training that combines on-the-job, paid experience with their classroom learning. Companies welcome such collaborations as it not only helps to address their own workforce needs, but they know they are in turn investing in a positive cycle of community growth. More skilled workers lead to a more prosperous region and a stronger economy for everyone.

Although we feel very good about the local initiatives we've implemented to date, more resources, ideas and support is needed and would certainly help. A national push for more Career Development courses within our High Schools is needed. Similar support was given for the successful implementation of STEM based classes across the country over the past decade resulting in more young people becoming interested in Science and Math. Encouraging our classrooms nationwide to increase and offer more meaningful career awareness and guidance curriculum (such as *EdgeFactor*) would most certainly have a positive impact on our nation's youth. Additionally, an expansion of Federal programs such ApprenticeshipUSA would also help our emerging workforce become better trained for the careers of the future. It is our young people, who will face higher unemployment rates due to the inability to match their true career interests (and required skills) with the openings at so many companies across the country.

Now more than ever we need to find ways to enhance the workforce development initiatives and programs that work. We must continue to support the business organizations and non-profits who train, advocate and bring entrepreneurs together. Work with our educators to ensure we're not just graduating students FROM school, but TO a meaningful career. Engage with organizations such as the Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council, U.S. Chamber and the Small Businesses Administration (SBA) to come up with new ideas, resources and innovative policy solutions that will lead this nation to strong and sustainable economic growth.

Sustaining small businesses and thus our local economies begins with how we can adapt, support necessary change, and lead a transformation of true workforce development. We must do so as we depend on the vibrancy of our local economy to generate taxes which support local government, schools, and our community's health and social safety nets.

In closing, thank you to this Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and for supporting and making policies that support Small Businesses across this great Country of ours!