

Local initiatives seek to get more Kamloops youth involved in trades

With some local businesses and labour groups noticing a shortage of skilled trades workers, the need to attract young people in Kamloops towards trades careers is growing.

By Eagle Andersen, Zack Kuan, and Yohann Fernandes

Drawing more people into trades careers has been recognized as an economic necessity, but stigma may deter youth interested in the field.

Skilled tradespeople are needed to build the critical infrastructure and housing projects that help communities grow. However, [some experts](#) are projecting a growing deficit of 10,000 Red Seal trades workers across Canada by 2026. As demand grows, local efforts will be needed to address the cultural and accessibility issues that could be turning away some young people from careers in skilled trades.

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Affordable housing project in Penticton, B.C. (Elliot Mumford Contracting)

For Andrew Elliot, co-owner of Elliot Mumford Contracting in Kamloops, B.C., the shortage of skilled tradespeople is pressing. Elliot, who met his business partner while completing Thompson Rivers University’s (TRU) carpentry program, is currently leading a team working on

a four-story affordable housing project in Penticton. To meet the demands of this project, Elliot has been trying to hire multiple carpenters with little success.

For Elliot and his company, this issue isn't specific to their current project. Struggling to find workers is now just the reality for employers in the construction industry.

"The past year or two hasn't been easy in terms of finding people and filling those jobs," says Elliot. "I'm sure it's not gonna get any easier."

Elliot's concern is that retiring tradespeople will only deepen this issue.

"[There is] not a whole lot of newer people getting into the trades so it's definitely a pretty big challenge," explained Elliot. "There's so many people retiring at the moment that I think it's gonna be hard even if there was a lot of people getting into trades to fill that void."

Elliot's concerns are not unwarranted, according to [Buildforce Canada](#), a national organization representing the construction industry, as 25,100 trades people are projected to retire in B.C. by 2027 with only 22,000 new workers being expected to fill in the gaps. Similarly, [WorkBC](#) estimates 5,820 job openings for carpenters alone between 2021 and 2031. 75 per cent of these are expected to be replacements for retirees, with the rest a result of economic growth.

Although there are 54 nationally recognized [Red Seal trades](#), provinces and territories [recognize](#) over 400 different professions. The shortage of workers means that specially ticketed tradespeople are becoming increasingly scarce, which can lead to very expensive travel costs.

Angeline Camille, a Membership Development & Indigenous Relations representative for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 993, has seen this firsthand. IBEW Local 993 is based out of Kamloops and works on major projects across B.C., supplying electrical workers to the LNG project in Kitimat and to the Site C Dam near Fort St. John.

Camille says that there is a need for specially trained winder electricians on these projects, a need that simply can't be met by IBEW Local 993.

"We're bringing them in from all over. Like from all over Canada. We're bringing them in from way out east... If we run out of ticketed [winders] here, that means we'll have to go through the States," Camille explained.



Angeline Camille at the IBEW Local 993 office (Eagle Andersen)

There are several barriers to entry for those who may be considering a trades career. With [recent statistics](#) showing that over 92.3 per cent of B.C. trades workers are men, women may feel intimidated pursuing these opportunities.

Although Camille says that she feels progress is being made in terms of inclusivity in trades work, as an Indigenous woman she has seen first hand how this could discourage some from pursuing a trades career.

“I’ve been on jobs where I’ve been the only Indigenous woman on the tools out of 2000 workers,” Camille explained. “You’re pegged out. You stick out like a sore thumb. A lot of people were accommodating to that, but a lot of people, they were very intimidating and racist about it.”

Private sector unionization rates decreased from 19 per cent in 1997 to 13.8 per cent in 2021 according to [Statistics Canada](#). Camille says that in the case of IBEW 993, periods of economic difficulty and recession led to people leaving the union. However, she says unions have a lot to offer young people.

“Going from a union, as an apprentice, your hours are credited,” she says. “We keep track of it. Your health and welfare, your medical is paid for through us, we have benefits for that.”

Sheila Brown, the district coordinator for School District 73's (SD73) Trades & Transitions program, is responsible for supporting students in the district that are interested in accessing trades-related programs. She says that she hears some students express concern about being looked down upon for entering the trades, which may also be contributing to the tradesperson shortage.



Sheila Brown in TRU's Industrial Training and Technology Centre during a Girls Explore Trades & Technology event (Zack Kuan)

“I see it particularly [with] the students who are in the more academic streams, and I hear it from parents too when I have phone conversations and I think that’s one of our big barriers we need to keep working through,” she says. “Trades is an excellent first choice.”

This sentiment was shared by Elliot who feels that the best way to destigmatize trades work would be to invite young people onto job sites to interact with workers. He stressed the importance of “actually seeing these jobs [and] having younger students potentially meet-up with trades people.”

Stigma and inclusivity might be contributors to the lack of trades workers in B.C., but Brown also felt that oftentimes, a big deterrent for young people choosing another path was the physical toll that some trades work can take.

“I think the style of work isn’t for everyone,” Brown says. “It is physically demanding work a lot of the time. I think we may have some deeply ingrained social values around trades.”

Building a new foundation

On November 17, Brown was at Thompson Rivers University for SD73’s Girls Explore Trades & Technology program, which gives female students between grades six and nine the opportunity to learn about trades careers. 48 students attended the event on that day.

The trades included in the Girls Explore program were heavy-duty mechanics, welding, electrical, and horticulture. Students from SD73’s programs for grades ten to twelve came as mentors.

“One of the really neat things that we started to see last year was the older students that we were calling back to be mentors had participated in an event like this when they were in grades six to nine,” she says.



Girls Explore Trades & Technology participants learning to weld at TRU (Sheila Brown)

Girls Explore Trades & Technology is one of several programs offered by SD73 to support students interested in trades careers. In the district's trades sampler, which began in 2014, students in grades 10 to 12 spend a semester at NorKam Secondary where they are introduced to four different trades and taught by TRU instructors. The samplers are divided into themes focusing on construction, mechanical, and industrial trades.

Through Youth Train in Trades, which Brown called a foundation program, 50 to 75 students complete their first year of postsecondary trades training at TRU, gaining high school and postsecondary credits in the process.

“When I explain it to students I call it your first year [of] university as a tradesperson,” she says.

Additionally, Brown says the school district can pay between one-half to two-thirds of the program's cost for each student.

“If you’re dialled in and you know where you want to go early, then you get some benefits for it,” she says.

Another SD73 program, Youth Work in Trades, lets high school students that work under tradespeople over the summer earn high school credits and apprenticeship hours. That program’s criteria includes understanding the right to refuse unsafe work and the need to be trained on equipment before use.

The curriculum for SD73’s high school trades programs, including the health and safety components, is provided by TRU. When it comes to workplace safety, Brown says it is “always a conversation that we keep at the forefront.”

“When you have young students, that idea of a good night’s sleep is one of your first pieces of protection,” she says. “That’s a hard barrier to overcome for us and for young people to understand. Sleep is your biggest impairment on a job site.”

While Brown says that SD73’s Trades & Transitions initiative was well-established when she first got involved 12 years ago, she says she sees momentum for trades programs building across British Columbia due to shifts in the provincial education curriculum.

“Different districts will call it different things, but it was probably around 20 years ago that the Ministry of Education changed their funding models to allow [dual-credit programs where] you get credit at high school and university programs,” she says. “And so that is where programs like this evolved from.”

Brown says that one way to combat the stigma surrounding trades careers is to emphasize that they are a “viable first choice” while also acknowledging the diverse skill sets that can lead to professional success.

“It’s recognizing a very different type of intelligence, and we are adding value to that and understanding what that looks like,” she says.

This means that for some high school students, trades programs are an opportunity to be evaluated in their own areas of strength for the first time.

“I was the trades coordinator at NorKam, and one of my favourite things was when report cards would come out and those trades students would say, ‘I made the honour roll... I’ve never made the honour roll before,’” says Brown.

However, obstacles still exist for people that might otherwise be interested in trades.

“A lot of problems in bringing in Indigenous people is that... these reserves are kinda in the middle of nowhere,” says Camille. “So bringing these trades to them, not just even reserves, you know, anyone living in rural areas. It’s really hard to bring them into school.”

Accessibility in rural areas is an issue SD73 has been working to address. Brown says the district plans to send a mobile training trailer to Logan Lake in February 2023 to offer foundation welding classes to high school students in the community.



The mobile training trailer parked outside of TRU’s Industrial Training and Technology Centre (Zack Kuan)

Brown says that while the decision to enter trades is ultimately different for everyone, it is important to remember that trades apprentices are paid to train. Elliot expressed similar confidence in the opportunities a trades career can bring.

“You hear tons of people telling their kids ‘stay in school, you don’t wanna be the person doing this,’” Elliot says. “It’s too bad that it is this way because there’s such a good living to be made in this kind of work.”