



BIRDVILLE ISD

# Construction technology program builds marketable skills and community

by Jennifer LeClaire



Superintendent  
Stephen Waddell

When it comes to learning building trades, students in Birdville ISD are doing much more than woodworking; they are building homes for families in need. In the past three years, Birdville ISD high school students have built two homes in the community, and they will soon break ground on a third.

It's all part of Birdville ISD's revamped construction technology program, which has forged partnerships with faith-based organizations, the city of Birdville, corporations and the Birdville Foundation for Educational Excellence (FEE) to realize the district's vision. The faith-based organizations screen and recommend home buyers in need of affordable housing; the city identifies distressed neighborhoods in need of revitalization; corporate partners donate labor, tools and materials; and FEE assists in funding projects at a low-interest rate so buyers are able to purchase the homes at affordable prices.

"The construction technology program is future-focused; it demonstrates what learning can be by putting academics into application," says Stephen Waddell, superintendent of Birdville ISD. "It's one thing to teach algebra or geometry and have students take a test. It's another thing to actually build a home where students have to choose the right mathematical tool to get the job done."

## Reframing an outdated program

Teaching construction technology isn't new to Birdville ISD. The program as it stands today is a rebirth of sorts of an older program that was shuttered in the 1980s because it no longer met industry standards and was not keeping up with the technological workplace. However, in the late 1990s, business and industry leaders asked Birdville ISD to form a task force to determine if the program should be reopened. The task force learned

that the average age of construction workers was 47 and the industry was in need of young people to pursue residential and commercial construction. After more than a year, the Birdville ISD task force recommended establishing a program to train students in construction technology and a new program began in the fall of 2000.

The real turning point, however, came about when a Birdville ISD school board member — who was also a general contractor — added the work-based learning component to the program, suggesting that students have opportunities to work alongside professionals on real-world job sites. In Birdville ISD's revamped initiative, students are developing marketable skills for future careers while learning strong work habits, responsibility, business ethics, honesty, loyalty and leadership.

The Birdville ISD's Board of Trustees supports the construction technology program through funding and oversight. The board approved funding to hire two teachers and a teacher's assistant to lead the program. The trustees also approved funding to transform a vacant auto shop into a construction technology facility, to purchase industry-standard equipment, and to



Kriz Ledbetter of Birdville High School works on an interior wall of a house.

provide stipends for students traveling to state and national building competitions.

Birdville ISD's construction technology program remains cutting-edge in its curriculum because of its partnerships with local industry and its proactive business advisory board. The members meet regularly to provide guidance to the district's classroom instructors.

The city of Birdville also plays an active role in the district's program by helping school officials locate condemned or unused city-owned lots.

"The city has helped us by giving up their rights to the taxes and allowing us to purchase the land with help from our faith-based partners," Waddell explains. "Our students are involved in building the houses from scratch — starting with getting the deeds, licenses and permits and pouring the foundation, and all the way to the finished work of the house."

Another critical component to the construction technology program is finding local tradespeople to donate their time and expertise and work alongside the students. Through community outreach efforts, Birdville ISD has developed relationships with large construction companies and retail businesses that are able to connect the district to licensed electricians, framers, plumbers and others willing to provide on-the-job training to students.

"You need strong partners to launch a program like this," Waddell says. "You can begin by talking to your city about acquiring land. Then you start talking to stores like Home Depot and Lowe's. We've discovered that once you get a few partners, many others want to help."

"You also need a partner to help you find a family in need (of housing)," he continues. "This isn't about selling the house on the market. This is about helping people in the community."



Linda Anderson

Faith-based groups can help with that."

Linda Anderson, director of Career and Technology Education, adds: "The students get to see the new homeowners receive their keys and move in to start a new life."

### People behind the program

One of the biggest challenges in launching such a program is finding the right teacher, according to Anderson. The district was set on hiring someone who was committed to quality, possessed exceptional trade skills *and* had a passion for passing along those skills to kids. And because



High school seniors Graham Gaines (checked shirt) and Michael Puckett set up a granite countertop.

there's always a risk in real estate, the district also wanted someone with sharp business acumen. It was a tall order, but Birdville ISD found all those qualities in Mike Benton.

"He has helped expand the program from small projects to building entire houses," she says, noting that under Benton's leadership, the construction technology teachers have developed a cost-effective business model that offers an authentic learning experience for students.

"We tell students that no matter what fields they go into, the skills they are getting are transferable," Anderson says. "A number of our students have gone on to work in the construction trades and related fields. Some have majored in topics like construction science because they were so excited about what they accomplished in high school."

Each year, the program attracts about 80 students, who can earn industry certifications from the National Center for Construction Education and Research and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. A number of Birdville ISD graduates have gone on to work for the program's business partners. Those partners also have been known to offer students advanced, on-the-job training and college tuition assistance.

Yet, getting a career jumpstart is only half of the picture. As Anderson explains it, these home sites are setting the stage for life-changing experiences for everyone involved — the students, the teachers and the home buyers.

"The construction technology program has been a great exercise in community service for the students. They understand the importance of community and what it means to give back," Anderson says. "They also receive skill acquisition and development, and they learn to operate as a team. And these are all skills they will need in the workplace. This program makes a great impact on students."

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