

# MARKETPLACE

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## These Students Wear Hardhats and Learn How to Cut Tiles

A Charter School in St. Louis Is Backed by Construction Firms; Masonry With Fake Fingernails

By CAROL TRAVIS

**S**T. LOUIS—Central Boyd can't get excited about his biology class. But when the talk turns to plumbing, the 16-year-old is all glee. He can describe with his hands which pipe goes where, though the names of the parts sometimes elude him. "Before I came to this school, I didn't know anything about construction, plumbing, sinks or roofs," he says. Central's father, Henry Boyd, a janitor in the public schools, nods approvingly. "He's learning a trade," Mr. Boyd says.

The Construction Careers Center takes the high school shop class where it hasn't gone before—to a taxpayer-funded charter school controlled by local construction companies looking for fresh workers and racial diversity. While administrators say the school also will prepare students for college, it will be judged by how many graduates pick up hammers.

"We didn't like what was happening in vocational education in public schools. We said, maybe it's time to solve this ourselves," says Richard Grebel, CCC's board president and the president of St. Louis's KCI Construction Co. The



Students Ray Sittner and Shari Oden, both 17 years old, learn to wire a house for electricity at the Construction Careers Center in St. Louis.

St. Louis chapter of the Associated General Contractors could end up spending \$6 million on the school's facility, he says.

As with other charter schools, independence from public-school administrators gives CCC the freedom to tailor its own curriculum. Workbooks, plus hardhats in construction class, are required. Dictionaries of construction terms have joined regular dictionaries in English class. Even the student-picked mascot, the bobcat, comes from the terrain of construction equipment made by Ingersoll-Rand Co.

Similar schools are opening elsewhere. A non-union charter school near Reno, Nev., is scheduled to start this fall. Others also plan to open schools in Philadelphia and Cranston, R.I. Others are watching their progress, aiming to reverse what they see as a bias against construction work by educators, who are typically rewarded for sending kids to college.

The schools join a handful of others started in recent years to fill labor shortages, including a

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## School Teaches Building Skills

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Washington, hotel-themed school founded by Marriott International Inc. and two Michigan schools affiliated with local hospitals.

Some education experts say such schools should be carefully monitored. "It's important, without question, for youngsters to learn vocational skills, but I sincerely hope it's not at the expense of academic skills," says Gerald Tirozzi of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Some similar schools have hit roadblocks. Last year, a union-run charter school in Toledo, Ohio, closed because of low enrollment, school officials say. In Philadelphia, a school founded by the American Institute of Architects plans to re-evaluate its curriculum because it wants a more prominent role for architecture.

CCC administrators say they aren't sure exactly what the curriculum will look like when the student body, which now consists of about 80 freshmen, graduates three years from now. But they point to the school's faculty, made up of experienced teachers, as proof that academics still come first. They also cite community interest: Applications for next year's freshman class have reached about 270 so far, up from last year's 158.

The idea for the school first came up three years ago. Local vocational education had been tossed about as the school district went about implementing a desegregation plan. Meanwhile, construction-training programs were drawing adults whose grasp of basic math, English and even nutrition was deficient. "We had to teach them you won't make it at a job site on a bag of chips and a can of soda," says Leonard Thonjes, president of the St. Louis chapter of Associated General Contractors.

To mollify union leaders worried about students supplanting unionized workers, the construction companies promised that CCC students would be encouraged to enter union apprenticeship programs and hiring halls upon graduation.

St. Louis's public-school district provides about \$7,000 per student each year to CCC, but the cost per student could be \$12,000 or more because of the training and equipment required, says Cleveland Hammonds, district superintendent. Mr.

Hammonds generally opposes charter schools but was sold on CCC by the prospect of minority students making contacts in the largely white world of St. Louis construction.

The students, who are predominantly African-American, decorate their hardhats with patriotic and union stickers. Because many come from broken homes or have few contacts with the workplace, structure and good work habits are emphasized. School-administered drug tests, for example, reflect a common feature of the students' future job sites.

Students take an hour of construction a day. On one recent afternoon in the school's basement, Brandon Daily, trowel in hand, was helping to cobble together an unsteady-looking brick wall. Alicia White, using a tile cutter, winced when her work resulted in an uneven break. At another table, Molujwon Deshay filled out a work order that required him to add the cost of material and labor to come up with a total price for the project.

Lanette Meyer, CCC's administrator, hopes that by their senior year this freshman class will be spending most of the day on job sites. Mr. Grebel, the school board president, hopes seniors will be renovating buildings and selling them back to the city to fund school expansion.

Students and parents aren't shy about admitting that they're attracted by the industry's healthy salaries—\$30 an hour plus benefits for some. "It's good money and it's fun, and they're looking for so many new people," says Alicia Moore, 15 years old and the school's "project manager," or student-body president. Ms. Moore says she likes masonry the best. But what about the long fake fingernails with a Playboy bunny logo that she likes to wear? She concedes they won't last long on the typical job site.

Reggie Rogers, 15, recalls that watching a local building go up when he was a middle schooler sparked his interest in applying to CCC. So far, he likes electrical work and carpentry best, and hopes some day to own his own contracting company. "If I don't excel in math, science, literature or social studies—if all else fails—at least I still have this. I plan to go to college. But I like having this as back support," he says.