

Building a future in the building trades

Construction Careers Center adds diversity to job sites

Special to the American

Kendrick England is a trail-blazer. So are Thomas Reynolds, James Jordan and Cherrill Sipes. As graduates of the Construction Careers Center, a four-year, charter high school founded by the Associated General Contractors of St. Louis, they're forging a new path of diversity through the St. Louis construction industry.

The school, which opened in 2001, draws 90 percent of its students from St. Louis' African-American community.

"I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't had the opportunities that the CCC provided," said England, a 2005 graduate who is on his way to becoming an engineer. England, who attends college at night, spends his days designing blueprints for The Young Group, a commercial and industrial contractor based in St. Louis.

The example England is setting as a young African American is crucial to the future of St. Louis's economy. A significant portion of the region's construction workers are scheduled to retire over the next several years, leaving the industry in desperate need of new employees. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer young people are applying for construction jobs, even though the average

position pays \$910 a week.

In 2001, the AGC introduced a revolutionary plan to reverse that decline when it opened the first charter high school in the nation designed specifically to train young people for rewarding, high-paying careers in the construction industry. AGC member firms and other community supporters contributed more than \$5 million to purchase and transform a vacant school on the city's

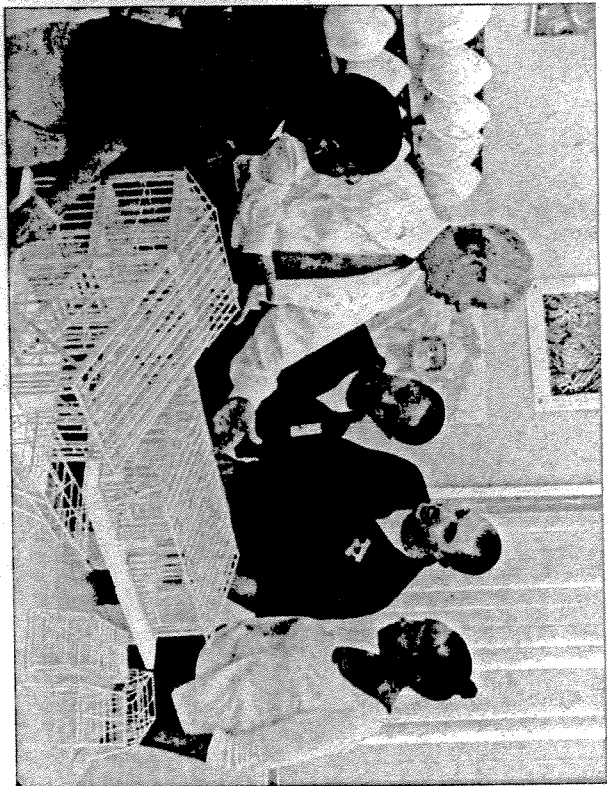
South Side into a state-of-the-art, hands-on construction training center.

Today, the CCC offers 365 students a challenging, fully accredited, high school curriculum that stresses problem solving skills, math proficiency and broad exposure to the construction industry — from entry-level positions and trade apprenticeships, to professional and management careers. Along the way, the school has attracted positive, high profile media coverage from the *Wall Street Journal* and other publications.

In May, the AGC invited award-winning author and NPR commentator Juan Williams to visit the school. Williams, whose recent book *Enough* promotes education as the key to achieving racial equality, called the CCC "a model for the nation."

"There are a lot of areas in this country where the contrac-

tion industry is not some-thing that you can just walk into," said Jordan. At the Construction Careers Center, "you have an advantage of getting a foot in the door. If I was graduating from a regular school, I'd be doing it on my own."



SM Wilson, president Scott Wilson tutors Construction Career Center students Gabrielle Fields, Garland Patton, and James Jordan on the art of designing a building model as Gwen Crimm, placement Coordinator at CCC, looks on.

tors are at odds with the minority community over hiring practices, about quotas," said Williams.

"Here is a positive way to address the situation, that we can train people and give them skills and help them get apprenticeships into the construction industry in a way that is not about numbers, but about having qualifications to do the job, to start their own companies and have their own dreams."

Since graduating its first class of seniors in 2005, the CCC has sent more than a hundred mostly African-American students to college, trade school and direct employment in the construction industry.

Some, like Thomas Reynolds, are pursuing apprenticeships. Reynolds, a 2005 graduate, is a second-year apprentice with Local 513 of the International Union of Operating Engineers

"I like being outside, being out there on a site constructing something," said Reynolds, who has worked on the I-64 reconstruction project. "I like knowing I was a part of building something."

The 2007 graduating class boasted yet another milestone for the school's seniors: Terrill Henderson is the first to gain entry into Local 396 of the International Association of Ironworkers' apprenticeship program. Another student, Garland Patton, had already started working on the I-64 reconstruction project as a carpenter's apprentice.

The school supports the students with a full-time placement coordinator and Interview Days to help students learn business etiquette and networking skills.

In 2006 it introduced the Construction Careers Center Coaching Program, a new initiative that matches students with

career coaches from contractors members of the Regional Business Council. Ten seniors in this year's graduating class were paired with construction professionals who assisted them with their ACT preparation, their applications to college, or full-time employment.

2007 graduate James Jordan said the Career Coaching Program opened his eyes to the multitude of jobs available in the construction field — from accounting and business management, to design, carpentry and heavy labor. Jordan, who received the highest ACT score in the CCC's history, plans to study electrical engineering through the University of Missouri-St. Louis/Washington University Joint Undergraduate Engineering Program. In the meantime, he's spending his summer working in the Mayor's Youth Summer Jobs Initiative at community outreach program

through sponsorship by McCarthy Building Companies. "Construction is not something that you can just walk into," said Jordan. At the Construction Careers Center, "you have an advantage of getting a foot in the door. If I was graduating from a regular school, I'd be doing it on my own."

The school also sponsors the ACE Mentoring Program, a partnership that connects students with professionals at such companies as Alberta Constructors, Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (HOK), Mackey Mitchell Associates, Paric Corporation, The KVA/ME Group and ABNA Engineering. New graduate Cherrill Sipes participated in both the ACE program and the Career Coaching Program before graduating from the CCC in June. Since graduation she's working as a paid intern for the Missouri Department of Transportation. In the fall, she'll begin studying for a degree in civil engineering.

"I really do believe I am a role model," said Sipes, who hopes to inspire other African-American women to follow her path into the construction industry.

Jordan also sees himself as a role model. "I see how it could be important to lead the way for more African Americans to get into the field," said Jordan. AGC President Len Toenges said the school's graduates are pioneers in the industry's future.

"As these students move into the construction field and begin climbing the 'ladder' of their chosen career path, they'll fulfill an important goal of the AGC — to diversity and enrich an industry that wants and needs their skills and talents," Toenges said.

Sipes has worked as an intern in the Civil Engineering Department of St. Louis City. She hopes other African-American students will give the field a chance as well. "There's always more than one choice," said Sipes. "Don't forget that, while you're working hard, it's going to pay off in the end."