The Trades — Sparks: Bench Strength

Custom Fabrication & Experiential Design | Classroom Discussion & Curriculum Plan | Grades 9–12

A Grow Allen Workforce Windows Resource · CTE, Advisory & Career Exploration Settings

To the Reader

This document is a guide, not a script. The video stands on its own in any classroom. Use all of this, part of it, or none of it — whatever serves your students best. The goal is conversation, not compliance.

Featured: Employees at Sparks' Fort Wayne fabrication facility — a global brand-experience company that builds custom trade show exhibits and environments for major national clients — including a young craftsman who trained through the FWCS Career Academy (formerly Anthis Career Center) before joining the team, and a shop leader speaking on mentorship and "bench strength."

Vídeo Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhxkcBZjs5o

Grow Allen YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@GrowAllen

FOR THE FACILITATOR

Why This Video Works

This video works because it doesn't come from a single polished spokesperson — it comes from several different voices inside the same shop floor. A young craftsman who started by sanding walls. A leader talking bluntly about mentorship and "bench strength." Someone pointing out that for every five tradespeople retiring, only two are coming in to replace them.

Together, they make an argument students don't hear often: that a company doing work for the biggest names in industry is built, literally, worker by worker, out of people who started exactly where these students are sitting right now.

PART 1 — BEFORE THE VIDEO

Pre-Viewing Activity

Opening Question — No Wrong Answers

Write this on the board before students walk in, or use it as a bell-ringer, entry ticket, or 'show what you know' activity:

> *"How many people do you think it takes to design and build a custom exhibit for a Fortune 500 company's trade show booth?"*

Have students write a guess on a sticky note and post it on the board. Don't correct anyone yet — just let the guesses sit there. You'll return to it after the video, once students have seen the scale and craftsmanship behind the work.

Quick Show of Hands

- How many of you have ever built, fixed, or made something with your hands — furniture, a project, a repair?
- How many of you have taken a shop, woodworking, or CTE class?
- How many of you know what a CNC machine does?
- How many of you have ever wondered who actually builds the displays, sets, or exhibits you see at a store, concert, or trade show?

Brief Framing — Keep It Short

"We're going to watch a short video featuring people who work at Sparks — a company right here in Fort Wayne that designs and builds custom exhibits and experiences for some of the biggest brands in the country. Just watch and listen. We'll talk after."

> **FACILITATOR NOTE**
> *Play the video without a worksheet or advance instructions. The less scaffolding before the video, the more genuine the reaction after — especially when the skills-gap statistic and the "bench strength" comments land.*

PART 2 — IMMEDIATE REACTION

Post-Viewing Discussion

No structure yet — just open reaction. Ask one question and let it breathe:

> *"What was the first thing that stood out to you?"*

Common things students will flag — use these as natural entry points:

- Someone started by literally sanding walls, and now helps build "bigger things"
- A skills gap: for every five people retiring from the trades, only two are coming in
- "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" — leadership advice, not just trade advice
- A 19-year-old who already owns a house
- The company builds work for "the biggest names in industry and business" — right here in Fort Wayne
- The idea of "bench strength" — passing down knowledge like a sports team develops its next players

> **FACILITATOR NOTE**
> *Don't rush to Part 3. The best conversations can happen in the first unstructured minutes after a video like this.*

PART 3 — STRUCTURED DISCUSSION

Text-Based — Using the Video Transcript

Give students the transcript printed out or displayed on screen. Work through it together using the discussion questions below, organized by theme. You do not need to cover every theme — choose what fits your class and your time.

Theme 1 — Starting Small, Building Big

> *"I started by sanding the walls... What excites me is seeing what I cut out helped build these bigger things."*

- What does it mean to find real meaning in a task as small as sanding a wall?

- Have you ever done something that felt small or boring at the time but turned out to matter more than you realized?
- Why do you think entry-level work in the trades often starts with basics like this before moving to bigger projects?
- What's the risk of only wanting to do the “exciting” parts of a job and skipping the fundamentals?

Theme 2 — Precision as a Mindset

> *“When I got to the career academy, I really learned that cabinet making, you have to be so accurate... everything's nice and tight and precise.”*

- This person credits a CTE/career academy class with directly preparing them for their job. What does that tell you about classes some students don't take seriously?
- What's the difference between work that's “good enough” and work that's precise? Why does that difference matter more in some jobs than others?
- Think about a class or activity you're in right now. Could it be training you for something you don't realize yet?

Theme 3 — Bench Strength and Mentorship

> *“Bench strength is something you're handing down. What knowledge can you share to the next generation?... People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.”*

- What do you think “bench strength” means, especially borrowed from sports? Why might a fabrication company use that term?
- The line about people needing to know you care before they care what you know — where else in life have you seen that be true?
- Later, someone compares this to a star athlete needing a “next man up.” Why does even the most skilled team still need a deep bench?
- Who is currently building “bench strength” in your life — passing you real knowledge, not just a grade?
- What might it mean to prepare for your future rather than plan for your future?

Theme 4 — The Skills Gap Is Real

> *“There's a skills gap that's currently here. For every five that are retiring from trades right now, there are two coming back in.”*

- What does a 5-to-2 ratio mean for someone graduating high school right now and looking at a trade career?
- Why do you think fewer young people are entering the trades even as the need for them grows?
- Does knowing about this gap change how you think about opportunity in this field?

Theme 5 — Skills That Follow You Home

> *“I'm 19. I went and bought a house... Every skill I took from there, I got to reuse in my own house.”*

- What does it mean that a 19-year-old already owns a house? What had to be true about their income and stability for that to happen?
- How is this different from skills that only apply inside a classroom and nowhere else?
- What's one skill you already have that you could use outside of school right now?

Theme 6 — Knowledge Isn't Just Book Smarts

> *“Knowledge isn't just book smarts... we have people with masters and art degrees and people that have high school diplomas or people that have been in the industry for 20-plus years... encyclopedic knowledge.”*

- What does it mean that people with a master's degree and people with only a high school diploma work side by side here, learning from each other?
- Why might a company want that mix of backgrounds instead of hiring only one “type” of person?
- Does this change how you think about which path — a degree, a trade program, or going straight to work — is the “right” one?

PART 4 — ACTIVITY OPTIONS

Choose One Based on Your Class and Time

A — The Real Numbers Comparison

20–30 minutes | Math + Career Literacy

Important: This exercise is NOT intended to steer students away from college or advanced degrees. The goal is to help students think carefully about **all** of the possibilities in front of them.

Give students this scenario in pairs:

Person A	Person B
Graduates high school and enters a cabinetmaking/fabrication career through a CTE-to-hire pathway, starting around $31,000/year and reaching the industry median of about $43,000/year within a few years as skills and certifications grow.	Graduates high school and enrolls in a 4-year university program. Takes on $20,000+ in student loans and begins repayment 6 months after graduation.

Ask pairs to research and calculate:

- What does Person A earn in years 1–4 combined? (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data puts cabinetmaker and fabricator pay between about $31,000 and $61,000 a year depending on experience and specialization.)
- What does Person B owe after 4 years? What is their estimated monthly loan payment?
- At what point — if ever — does Person B's degree “pay off” compared to Person A's head start?
- What certifications or specialized skills (CNC operation, precision machining, design software) could Person A earn that would increase their earning potential?
- Which path carries more risk? Which has a higher ceiling — and does that ceiling depend on the person or the path?

A note for the class: graduating with substantial debt is not inevitable. Scholarships, work-study programs, summer employment, and campus jobs can dramatically reduce what a student owes. Encourage all students to work with their school counselor on a plan that minimizes debt regardless of the path they choose. Debrief as a class — there is no right answer. The goal is to think clearly about trade-offs, not to declare a winner.

FOR THE TEACHER:
Here's a well-sourced breakdown on the question “is college even worth it? *This is a genuinely contested topic in current research — not a simple "yes/no" — the information below provides some real numbers plus the nuance underneath them.*

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce is the highly-cited source. Their most recent analysis puts median lifetime earnings at roughly $1.6 million for a high school diploma holder and $2.8 million for a bachelor's degree holder — a 75% lifetime earnings premium. Other Georgetown breakdowns put the gap slightly higher, around 84% more than high school-only workers, with the exact figure depending on which years and methodology are used. CEW GeorgetownCEW Georgetown
But here's the carpenter comparison which could be more similar to what we see at Sparks, remembering that the skilled tradesmen as Sparks are not out building houses: Carpenters earn a median of $60,580 a year as of May 2025, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data — and that's a

job with no degree requirement, no tuition, and paid training from day one. Run that out over a 40-year career and you're looking at roughly $2.4 million in lifetime earnings before any wage growth — well within the range of many bachelor's degree fields, and above the Georgetown median for humanities and education majors specifically, which Georgetown puts at $58,000/year for education and public service fields versus $98,000/year for STEM fields. In other words, "a bachelor's degree" isn't one number — a STEM grad and an education grad are earning almost $40,000/year apart from each other before you even get to the carpenter comparison. NueCareerCEW Georgetown

Why the simple version is misleading

A few things complicate the clean "college pays $1.2 million more" narrative:

The college wage premium has stopped growing. Research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis found that the gap in wages between college-educated and high school-educated workers has been essentially flat for the last 20 years, and in 2023 it was slightly lower than in 2000. Meanwhile, the cost of a four-year degree rose 40% between 2000 and 2022-2023. A premium that isn't growing, paired with a cost that keeps growing, is a real problem for the ROI math — as one Minneapolis Fed economist put it, a flat premium next to rising costs mechanically reduces the typical financial return. Federal Reserve Bank of MinneapolisFederal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

Debt drags on the outcome for a lot of graduates. The numbers vary a lot by source, but a reasonable current estimate is around $35,530 in average debt for a bachelor's degree graduate, with 47% of Class of 2024 graduates from four-year public and nonprofit schools graduating with debt at all. Georgetown's own $2.8 million lifetime figure doesn't fully account for loan interest, only tuition and forgone wages while in school. SoFiGet Out of Debt Guy

A meaningful share of high school-only and associate-degree workers out-earn bachelor's degree holders. Georgetown's own research is blunt about this: at least one quarter of high school graduates earn more than an associate's degree holder, and an associate degree holder in a health practice occupation has median lifetime earnings just above the median for all bachelor's degree holders. Field and occupation matter more than the credential itself in a lot of cases. CEW Georgetown

A newer, more rigorous ROI calculation still comes out positive, but closer than the headline number. Economists at the New York Fed calculated a college degree's ROI at 12.5%, comparing favorably to the stock market's roughly 8% long-run return and bonds around 4% — but that's using median (not average) graduate earnings specifically to avoid the outlier-inflation problem, and it's still an average across all majors and schools, hiding the same variance. SSTI

What's changing right now on the employer side

This is the part that's moving fastest and matters most for your "is it still valid" question:

- 70% of organizations report using skills-based hiring in 2026, up from 65% in 2024, with removing degree requirements expanding U.S. candidate pools 15.9 times over Skillfuel
- GPA screening by employers has collapsed from 73% in 2019 to 42% in 2026 Hirelytica
- But this shift is uneven and slower than predicted: only 46% of employers plan to expand skills-based hiring further in 2026, and 78% still consider work experience equal to or more valuable than a degree — meaning employers aren't so much rejecting degrees as they are treating them as one signal among several, with real-world experience often winning Forbes
- On the trades side specifically, trade school enrollment is up 48% since 2021, and Gen Z now makes up 31% of new apprenticeship enrollments, with entry-level certified trades wages in some fields now beating entry-level degree-required jobs Thebluecollarrecruiter

The honest bottom line

The data doesn't support either a pure "college is dead" or "college is still obviously the best move" narrative. We also have to take into consideration the numbers above bounce between median and an average, not a median, thus a significant number of low numbers (or high) can sway the average. It supports something closer to: **the degree premium is real on average, but it's concentrated in specific fields (STEM, health, business), it's stopped growing while costs keep rising, and a meaningful and growing number of skilled-trade and certification paths now match or beat many bachelor's degree outcomes** — especially once you account for zero debt, four extra years of earning and 401k contributions, and paid on-the-job training instead of paid tuition.

For your purposes of Grow Allen, this is a strong, defensible message: the question isn't "degree vs. no degree," it's "does this specific student's chosen path — degree, certification, apprenticeship, or straight to work — match a field where that credential actually pays off." That's a more honest and more useful framing

than either side of the "college is/isn't worth it" debate usually offers. It is a “yes, and” equation, not a hard and fast determination that one is better than the other.

B Interview a Fabricator or Tradesperson

One-Week Project | Research + Communication

Students identify one person in their life — family, neighbor, community member — who works in fabrication, manufacturing, or a related trade. They conduct a structured interview:

- How did you get into this field?
- What does a typical workday look like?
- What certifications or specialized training do you have — and how did you get them?
- What do you earn, and how has that changed over time?
- What's the most precise or exacting part of your job — the part where a small mistake really matters?
- What's the coolest or most memorable project you've worked on?
- Did anyone talk to you in high school about this path? If not — what would have helped?
- If you could talk to a high school student considering this career right now, what would you tell them?

Students write a 1-page reflection or present to the class. The goal: hear the real story from someone in their own community, in their own words.

C Career Pathway Mapping

20–25 minutes | Individual + Pair Share

Each student maps their own version of the pathway shown in the video — and then identifies how they will actively prepare at each stage:

STEP	IN THE VIDEO	MY POSSIBLE PATH	HOW I AM PREPARING RIGHT NOW
Entry Point	Career Academy — cabinet making & precision training	?	*What CTE, shop, or trade classes exist at my school that connect to a hands-on career? Am I taking them seriously?*
First Job	Hired as a fabricator/cabinetmaker at a company like Sparks	?	*What skills, certifications, or work habits would an employer like this expect from me on day one? Am I building those now?*
Mentorship	Learning “bench strength” from experienced craftsmen	?	*Who is currently mentoring*

			me — or who could be? Am I showing up in a way that earns that investment?
Skill Application	Using career-academy skills to fix up his own house at 19	?	*What skill am I building right now that I could already put to use outside of school?*
Long-Term	Contributing to work for "the biggest names in industry"	?	*What would it take for me to do work I'm genuinely proud to put my name on?*

The fourth column is intentionally uncomfortable. Its purpose is to push students past "here's my dream" and into "here's what I'm actually doing about it." For many students, that column will be mostly blank at first. That's the point. The blank space is the conversation.

D The Debate

20–25 minutes | Critical Thinking

Divide the class into three groups. Each group prepares and argues one position:

- Group 1 argues: "A hands-on trade like fabrication is a smarter path for many students than a four-year degree."
- Group 2 argues: "A four-year degree still provides more long-term security and more options."
- Group 3 — playing themselves: "I'm not sure yet, and that's okay. Here's how I'm keeping my options open."

Give each group 10 minutes to prepare, then hold a structured 10-minute discussion. Afterward, drop all assigned positions and ask the room:

> *"What's the real answer? And is this even an either/or question?"*

FACILITATOR NOTE

Group 3 consistently produces the most honest and useful conversation. Validating students who don't yet know what they want — while still pushing them to think about how they're ***preparing*** *— is frequently where the real breakthrough happens. Even when a student changes his/her mind, preparation is better than just planning. Dreams don't happen without preparation as true preparation allows one to take skills learned with them wherever they go.*

PART 5 CLOSING REFLECTION

Individual Writing — Exit Ticket

Students write responses to any two of the following three prompts:

- "Before this video, I thought careers in fabrication or the trades were _____. Now I think _____."

- “The part of this video that most applies to my own life is _____ because _____.”
- “One question this video left me with is _____.”

FACILITATOR NOTE

Collect and read before the next class. Student responses will tell you exactly where to take the conversation next — and which students might benefit from a one-on-one follow-up about this path.

GOING FURTHER

Extension Ideas

Multi-Day Unit

- Day 1: Video + discussion (Parts 1–3)
- Day 2: Activity — Option A or B
- Day 3: Guest speaker — a fabricator, designer, or shop lead
- Day 4: Site visit or virtual tour of a fabrication shop or CTE cabinet-making lab
- Day 5: Reflection presentations and pathway mapping (Option C)

Guest Speaker Connections — Fort Wayne & Allen County

- Sparks — Fort Wayne fabrication facility, the direct connection to this video
- FWCS Career Academy or EACS Career Center (formerly Anthis Career Center) — cabinetmaking, precision machining, and construction trades programs
- Ivy Tech Fort Wayne — Industrial Technology and Precision Machining programs
- Local fabrication shops (e.g., Kimmel Fabrication Studio, Fort Wayne Fabrication) — additional employer connections in trade show, exhibit, and metal fabrication work
- Grow Allen Workforce Windows network — fabrication, design, and manufacturing employers across Allen County

Connect to Grow Allen

Workforce Windows Tours can bring students directly into fabrication and design environments — shop floors, CNC labs, and studio spaces — giving them the same “I can see myself here” moment featured in this video, in a real Allen County workplace. As one Sparks team member put it, you never know when an opportunity might spark a student's interest all of a sudden. Visit **GrowAllen.com** to connect your class to upcoming Workforce Windows opportunities.