According to Forbes, there are close to 3.5 million Americans working in the construction sector, where the median salary is $59,000. However, the construction contractors and suppliers, like so many other industries, are experiencing labor shortages and well-paying middle-class jobs are going unfilled. Skilled laborers, technicians, operators, engineers, truck drivers and other trained workers are in short supply.

U.S. News & World Report documents that for the first quarter of 2018, employers have been looking to fill an average of nearly 225,000 construction jobs each month. While more than half the contractors responding to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce/USG Commercial Q2 2018 Construction Index expect to hire more workers, a high percentage report difficulty finding skilled workers. The shortage is disproportionately impacting small companies: 65 percent of small firms (revenues of less than $10 million) have difficulty finding skilled workers, compared with fewer than half (42 percent) of large contractors (revenues of $100 million or more).

The skills gap has many causes. Unemployment in the United States is reaching its lowest level in decades, which is increasing competition for labor. New economic sectors have emerged in recent years to attract workers away from construction. Potential workers may not appreciate the offers by the construction sector to work with innovative technology, nor the many opportunities for upward mobility. Secondary schools are focused less on technical education and more on preparing students for college. Additionally, businesses haven’t engaged consistently with educators and government to ensure school curricula are aligned with local economic needs.

NACA and its individual member associations support an array of federal policies and programs to incentivize the offering and undertaking of career and technical education, with an emphasis on trades and on-the-job training to develop marketable skills to meet the demands of the 21st century economy. However, the industry has a responsibility to confront the problem and help develop its own workforce with incentives and training programs. NACA supports the following priorities:

**Perkins Act**: First passed in 1986, the Perkins Act was reauthorized by Congress in July of 2018, providing $1.3 billion for career and technical education. The money will be distributed every year to states to be disbursed through grants to fund the development and implementation of career and technical education programs. State allocations are determined by the U.S. Department of Education. Congress must ensure that money authorized for Perkins programs is fully appropriated annually and our industry must engage aggressively at the federal, state and local levels to ensure that Perkins programs are successfully implemented.
National Council for the American Worker: On July 19, 2018, President Trump signed an Executive Order establishing the National Council for the American Worker and the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board. The Council is charged with developing a national strategy for creating and promoting workforce development strategies that provide skills-based training, foster cooperation between the federal government, private employers, educational institutions, labor unions and non-profit organizations, and work with federal agencies for consistent implementation. Assisting this Council is the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board, which is directed to advise the Council on the workforce policy of the United States, including recommending steps to encourage the private sector and educational institutions to invest in education, training and re-training through apprenticeship and work-based learning.

Pledge to America’s Workers: In conjunction with the Executive Order promoting workforce development, the White House is encouraging American companies to sign the Pledge to America’s Workers – a commitment to train and retrain new and existing workforce. This initiative by the White House is critical to raising the awareness of the labor shortages facing the concrete and cement industries, and NACA members are urging their member companies to support the program by signing the Pledge.

Apprenticeships: NACA members have supported legislation to expedite the establishment and approval of apprenticeship programs by the Departments of Labor and Education. Apprenticeships provide employees the opportunity to gain skills in an industry and at a company seeking to place them in good paying jobs.

DRIVE-Safe Act: In an effort to fully utilize the industry’s existing pool of drivers, NACA members support the DRIVE-Safe Act. This legislation seeks to lift federal restrictions on drivers at least 18 years of age but under the age of 21 operating commercial motor vehicles across state lines.

Company Initiatives: While NACA members are working to raise the visibility of the cement and concrete industry skills gap at the federal level, the problem won’t be solved by Washington, D.C. alone. It is incumbent on industry leaders to use the tools provided by the federal and state governments to confront the challenge. That means, among other things, learning more about Perkins Act programs and local workforce initiatives and engaging with local schools and governmental officials to ensure they understand the skills graduates must have to succeed in construction careers now and in the future.