



**BEFORE THE
ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
OF THE OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

REP. PAUL ZELTWANGER, CHAIRMAN

**HOUSE BILL 2 TESTIMONY
OF
THE MAHONING VALLEY MANUFACTURERS COALITION**

**BY
BRIAN BENYO
BRILEX INDUSTRIES, INC.**

MAY 22, 2019

Good morning. My name is Brian Benyo and I am the founder of the Mahoning Valley Manufacturers Coalition. MVMC is an employer-led sector partnership in Trumbull, Mahoning, and Columbiana counties.

My brother, Alex, and I own several manufacturing businesses located in the Youngstown area. Almost eight years ago, it became apparent to me that the single most critical issue facing our businesses was the lack of skilled talent. It was the primary limiting factor to our growth.

At that time, I reached out to about 15 other local companies to ask if they were experiencing that same issue. Indeed they were. As a result, we recognized the need to do something about it. So, we banded together, pooled our resources, and formed the Mahoning Valley Manufacturers Coalition.

Over the past eight years, we have engaged and helped improve the output from our local education and training providers at all levels. We have engaged the public workforce system and the broader community in an effort to connect individuals with well-paying manufacturing career pathways. Our sector partnership is making a true difference, and I can see the results in my business and in our region. But there is still much work to be done. With the state's partnership and support, I believe we can have an even greater impact.

I bring the experience of this work, as I testify before you today in support of House Bill 2.

First, let me commend you for recognizing workforce as a top priority. As I mentioned earlier, I believe workforce development is the single most important issue facing Ohio businesses today — particularly in manufacturing. It will be key to our continued economic growth. Mostly, I want to thank you for recognizing industry sector partnerships as an effective way to better align the Ohio workforce and education system to industry demands.

The legislation would allocate \$2.5 million a year to support regional partnerships across the state. I can't say how strongly I feel that this is a relatively small investment that will pay great dividends.

For me, as a business owner, I've seen the industry sector partnership model provide a great deal of value and return on the investment we've made locally.

Let me describe why I believe the approach is so different and so effective from my view. Then, I'll talk more specifically about some examples of the work this legislation would support in the Mahoning Valley.

Simply bringing a group of manufacturers together to identify our common needs was our first accomplishment. Prior to MVMC, we didn't naturally come together, but the

need was so great that we knew we had to act differently, and the sector partnership gave us a forum to do so. It also enabled us to create a common voice to educate the community about our career opportunities and to communicate a unified message to our education, training, and workforce partners about our needs.

MVMC has given us a vehicle to provide leadership and ownership of the challenges we face – and a productive way to address them. The reason I formed the group originally was because I didn't see anyone else stepping up to tackle the issues in a comprehensive manner, and I certainly didn't see anyone acting with the level of urgency I felt was needed to make a difference. I also believed that industry couldn't wait for someone else to solve our problems, so we needed to step up and get in the game.

I've served on numerous advisory committees and school boards. I've answered a million surveys and had a lot of people knocking on my door wanting to tell me about their individual programs or services. What was lacking was a cohesive strategy that I could plug into. MVMC, has enabled us to create a system of local manufacturers working with our partners around an aligned set of priorities and needs.

Our sector partnership created a two-way dialogue between our manufacturers and our partners. We gained a deeper understanding of the education and workforce providers and the resources and services that could be brought to bear – and they gained a deeper understanding of our needs.

MVMC has become a forum where we can problem-solve with our partners to create solutions stronger than any one company or individual program or agency could have developed on its own. As a result, we have been able to have a greater impact.

We have given our education partners the level of detail they needed to be more responsive to our needs. This has enabled them to improve their programs and, in some cases, build out new ones where gaps existed. Sector partnerships enable a richer feedback loop than most individual advisory committees ever could, and a greater efficiency for industry by enabling us to communicate our needs at one table, across multiple institutions.

The fact that we have a common strategic plan and priorities also has positioned us to attract other federal and local funding to support our strategies. Different partners have leveraged their strengths and identified, pursued, and aligned resources in support of our common mission.

Allow me to share some specific examples of our successes:

When we first formed MVMC, there was a great deal of disparity among students coming out of similar programs across counties. By working more closely together with our education partners and creating standardization, our training programs have improved greatly. Students coming out of the programs are more prepared, and as an employer, I now have a greater level of confidence hiring them due to the improved curriculum and industry credentials, which they incorporated.

Industry credentials, also supported in this bill, provide companies with a way to validate the skills and competencies of students and employees. Before we adopted a common set of credentials through MVMC, we arbitrarily required three-to-five years' experience, hoping that if they worked down the street for a while, they would know enough to perform at our company. But when we're trying to expand the talent pool, we can no longer afford to do that. It's invaluable to have these credentials to evaluate candidates and advance our existing workers along their career pathways.

Another success of MVMC was in updating equipment in training labs throughout the region. We found the equipment students were training on to be completely outdated. There were lathes and mills that looked like they were from World War II. Through MVMC, we inventoried all the equipment in the labs throughout our three counties, identified a specific list of new and updated equipment that was needed at each institution, and took a coordinated approach when new funding became available.

Over the course of three to four years, we've been able to update the labs and provide students with more modern equipment. I should note that this meant our education partners had to agree to work together instead of competing for state and federal funding. This also meant that some of them had to wait their turn in order to meet the greatest needs.

We also had a gap in more advanced training to support our existing workers in their continued skill development. Through MVMC, we have created three group-sponsored apprenticeship programs in machining, industrial maintenance, and welding. What that means is that manufacturers agreed to common standards, and MVMC acts as the sponsor of record. This streamlines the process for individual companies to participate in the apprenticeship programs and makes it easier for the schools to deliver common technical instruction. Without MVMC, Brilex would not have the nine apprentices we do today.

Having high-quality training programs isn't enough. We need more students in these classrooms. So we are doing more and more to get the word out about manufacturing job opportunities. We host educators in our facility, so they can get a better

understanding of today's manufacturing and can build it into their lesson plans when they go back to the classroom.

Through MVMC, our employees are out in the schools almost weekly. We've developed relationships with the schools so they call us for presentations, mock interviews, and the like. We recently opened our doors during In-demand Jobs Week. This summer, we'll host pre-apprentices between their junior and senior years in a new program created by the MVMC in partnership with our local career and technical centers. Every summer, we work with our local children's science center to host summer camp students.

We recently launched a marketing campaign called Making Ohio. Through paid web searches and paid ads on social media, we are generating leads and feeding them to our Career and Technical Centers and Community College with the goal of full enrollment this fall.

I could go on and on about the many facets of our sector partnership. We've done this by bootstrapping with our member contributions, piecing together grants, and aligning existing resources.

This funding in House Bill 2 would enable us to grow our capacity and provide stronger coordination of the many partners and solutions necessary for success. It also will help us to expand our reach to young people, parents, career switchers, and others who need to know more about the manufacturing jobs that are fueling Ohio's economy and can provide them with a career they'll love and economic stability for their families.

The note I'll end on is this: I've seen Ohio invest millions of dollars in this grant program or that initiative. What I've not seen is investments in existing systems. The funding for sector partnerships in House Bill 2 will create and strengthen systems across the state that are necessary to tackle our skills shortages, increase skill and credential attainment, and better align existing partners and services along the way. That will have lasting impact.