



JIM McCAFFREY/*The Evening Bulletin*

PHA Executive Director Carl Greene (right) and Local 98 Electrician Alex Perez talk to a class of pre-Apprenticeship students. The program has been a success in getting students into apprenticeships with the local unions.

## Pre-Apprenticeship Program Sets High Bar For School District

By JIM McCAFFREY  
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PHILADELPHIA — As the Philadelphia School District begins to orient students towards futures working in the building trades it may want to look at the program the Philadelphia Housing Authority has developed as a model.

The school district recently signed a labor agreement committing city labor unions to taking as many as 425 apprentices from Philadelphia public schools during the next four years.

The PHA's Pre-Apprenticeship Program in the Building Trades was an idea developed by PHA Executive Director Carl Greene. The program prepares applicants from Philadelphia public housing for apprenticeships in the building trades. The program began in 1999 at Tasker Homes, where four local unions participated in the 21-weeks of training.

Today there are 16 building trades working as partners in the program accepting pre-apprentice placements. The program is in its 16th cycle. Since 1999 it has graduated

243 men and 224 women. It proudly claims almost 59 percent of those graduates have passed union exams.

It is a true partnership. Union instructors teach in the PHA classrooms and students receive minimum wage while they are in the pre-apprenticeship program.

The program brags 80 percent of the graduates have never returned to public assistance.

Greene confirms, "The Pre-Apprenticeship program gives our clients the skills and work attitude they need to land well-paying jobs and build new lives. We believe the program is the pre-eminent course of its kind in the region and beyond. It also has the added benefit of diversifying the workforce by giving skilled minority workers a chance to share in the construction boom now underway at PHA and in Philadelphia overall."

Apprentices are in demand in the Philadelphia construction market. The Housing Authority has plans to erect or rehab \$1.2 billion in housing in the coming years. The school district has nearly \$2 billion in new construction and renovation

planned. The Pennsylvania Convention Center is looking at a three-quarter billion-dollar project. The University of Pennsylvania is beginning a major building program. Unions, in short, will need trained people for all of the work available.

Yesterday, George Johnson, who as the training coordinator runs the pre-apprenticeship program for Greene out of the Work Force Development Center in South Philadelphia, welcomed visitors to the center to watch students work in their third day of class.

Local 30 member Larry Boylan was teaching a roofing class in one room. Next door, Local 98's Alex Perez had the attention of a dozen students in an electrician's class. Across the hall George Sambuca of Carpenter's Local 37 was showing students a film demonstrating how a house is built - everything from deeds to doorknobs.

All of the students come from public housing. As he passed through the classrooms, Greene would stop and ask which public housing areas they were from. Their answers were like a map of the city.

Johnson emphasizes the program is not set up to specifically train people to be carpenters, electricians, roofers or painters - though they will have rudimentary skills when they graduate. The program is really set up to give people the skills they need to pass the apprenticeship tests that allow them entrance into those trades. While the mornings are devoted to learning construction skills, the afternoons are given to reading, writing and arithmetic.

"This program is based not on teaching trades but giving people the qualities they need to work in middle-income trades," Johnson declared. "Things like showing up to work every day and showing up on time. We want them to understand this is a growth period for them and that this kind of training has to be done. Attitude adjustment is the key. We teach life skills."

Most sessions have up to 100 applicants. Each must take an admissions test and submit to a substance abuse test. Graduates know they may eventually be making \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year in a trade.

About 50 applicants are accepted each session.

Greene explained the pre-apprenticeship program fills an obvious need in the city. The communities where his public housing is built want people from the area to have the jobs building that housing. The problem

was there weren't enough qualified people to fill those jobs.

The pre-apprenticeship program has bridged the gap and created opportunities for people to succeed.

It's not easy.

Many applicants come in with 6th grade reading and math skills. They are asked to reach high school level reading and math ability by the end of the 21 weeks.

"The program helps them to establish a work history," Greene said. "We will employ graduates at the PHA if it is neces-

sary but we've had to do that less and less. We need more carpenters. We need more roofers. We need more electricians. We need more painters. The need for skilled trades is here. We have no problem getting people placed."

He added, "People think the unions are not accepting minorities. That they are not accepting people from the community. That's not true. From the beginning they were all willing to join us as partners. They are eager to help us. The building trades are our partners in the most successful pre-

apprenticeship programs in the state of Pennsylvania."

Funding for the program comes from grants from the state, corporate grants, federal and city money, and other private grants.

"We are able to help whole families solve the whole problem of crime and poverty," Greene boasts. "The community is balanced with these placements into traditional neighborhoods. We help people to break the cycle of poverty. They get to participate in the economic growth of the city."