

BOND BYLINE DRAFT

Why West-MEC Career Pathways are Vital to Supporting the West Valley's Rapid Growth

By: Dr. Scott Spurgeon, Superintendent of Western Maricopa Education Center (West-MEC)

West-MEC has long been a pillar of career and technical education (CTE) in Arizona, and its influence has only continued to expand. Over the last 20 years, the district has experienced remarkable growth in both size and impact. What began as a small CTE district has grown into a major regional force, now serving high school students from 130 schools and adult learners from across the region within West-MEC's footprint. Today, West-MEC supports more than 40,000 students, expanding access through state-of-the-art facilities and strong partnerships with industry leaders such as TSMC, Amazon, Amkor, Gatorade, and Nestlé.

When parents, guidance counselors, and students alike ask, "Why West-MEC," these are just a few of the reasons we share:

Expansive boundaries create increased access

Maricopa County is home to 58 school districts that serve over 750,000 students. With five active campuses located in Avondale, Buckeye, Glendale, Phoenix, and Surprise, West-MEC's current footprint spans over 3,876 square miles.

West-MEC recently opened the Career Academy @Agua Fria in September 2025. This is a collaboration between West-MEC and Agua Fria Unified School District. Located behind Agua Fria High School, the campus launched with programs in air conditioning technology, electrical trade specialty, medium/heavy diesel technology, and welding technology. By bringing programs closer to students, we help overcome transportation barriers and open doors to opportunity. This model will serve as a blueprint for future partnerships with other high schools.

Looking ahead, construction is underway on a new Southeast Campus at Thomas Road and the Loop 101 Freeway. The facility will house programs in artificial intelligence, medical assisting, physical therapy, IT security, advanced manufacturing, and welding, with completion expected in June 2026.

Peoria City Council also recently approved a ground lease agreement for 14 acres near Peoria and 95th avenues, with plans for a new campus at that location.

By increasing access to CTE programs, we prepare more of Arizona's youth for in-demand careers with engagement through hands-on, real-world learning and even increase high school graduation rates.

A 2022 report by the U.S Department of Education found that CTE-concentrated students' graduation rate is higher than that of their peers. According to the study, CTE students have a 94% high school graduation rate.

While graduating high school is a significant accomplishment for students, parents, and educators, the data is clear: It isn't – and it shouldn't be – the end goal. Students who participate in Career and Technical Education (CTE) are more likely to progress through and complete their postsecondary programs than their non-CTE peers. This advantage stems from meaningful career exploration in high school, which promotes focus, confidence, and alignment between their education and career goals. CTE certifications provide a wide range of job opportunities in high-paying career fields, oftentimes recession-proof industries, that have a high demand for new and qualified talent.

Technological advances with hands-on learning

Over the course of the last few years, West-MEC has invested in multiple modalities.

Last year, West-MEC acquired the Reax Run and Reax Board made by Reaxing, a neuromuscular training equipment company based out of Milan, Italy, for its physical therapy program. West-MEC's Physical Therapy is the first CTE program to use this technology in its curriculum in the United States. Both the treadmill and board use sudden dynamic impulse technology to encourage the user to consistently adapt and to amplify the user's muscular, sensory and nervous activity.

West-MEC's Automation and Robotics Systems students are learning to operate high-performance robot "dogs" developed by Stokes Robotics. In the industry, robot dogs can be deployed in dangerous or hard-to-reach situations and are often used for inspections, security, and public safety. This effort aims to enhance student learning and keep pace with industry demands, ensuring our students gain the most up-to-date and relevant skills.

This July marked a major milestone with the expansion of our Northeast Campus, introducing a 16,500-square-foot advanced manufacturing and welding facility. The new space features state-of-the-art labs and a cleanroom outfitted with the latest technology to train students for in-demand roles in the semiconductor industry, including facility, equipment, and maintenance technicians.

This year, we also deployed immersive AI learning tools in the Medical Assisting and Aesthetics programs. Using a new MetaCoach app from the Pathway AI Suite, instructors will be able to assign students simulated patient scenarios. After the student completes the scenario, the teacher will receive a report showing the student's score that assesses their professional and technical skills.

The advanced technologies that West-MEC provides for their students gives them real-world experience and equips them with the skills employers are looking for. By offering these opportunities, students gain confidence in career-related skills and practices.

Increasing employability

Just under half of Maricopa County high school graduates are pursuing higher education. The majority of high schoolers must therefore be prepared after graduation for their first career with adequate professional, technical, and employability skills.

From 2017 to 2023, the number of program completers in West-MEC's secondary program for high school students has nearly doubled. More than 90% of program completers from 2023 are positively engaged in the economy through direct employment, postsecondary education, the military, or mission work; 99% of program completers earn an industry-recognized credential that gives them a leg up in the workforce.

Employers benefit from a highly skilled workforce, reducing hiring gaps and boosting productivity, while students enter stable, well-paying careers without accumulating significant debt. West-MEC's proven outcomes, such as a 95% completion rate and unmatched industry alignment, directly address workforce shortages and position the region as a hub for economic resilience and innovation.

The continued relocation of high-tech and manufacturing businesses to the West Valley, along with growing career opportunities in Arizona, provides CTEDs with a unique opportunity to prepare our future workforce from the ground up. Filling these jobs with local talent will enable our young professionals to work in or near their residential areas, reduce turnover rates, and foster economic growth throughout the state. More than 9,000 industry credentials earned by West-MEC students last year are powering local businesses and strengthening our economy.

West-MEC also exemplifies how local tax dollars can be effectively reinvested to stimulate local economies from a fiscal and funding perspective. West-MEC's fiscal year 2024 operations spent about \$65.8 million in the region and employed roughly 190 staff, which, through multiplier effects, generated an estimated \$100+ million in total economic output in Maricopa County and supported over 500 jobs in the state's economy last year.

By 2026–2030, West-MEC's annual economic output contribution could well exceed \$150 million as its network of campuses and students grows. These outcomes create a virtuous cycle where increased employment, higher wages, and economic activity collectively uplift the entire community.

Maricopa County's rapidly evolving job market demands an education system that prepares students for the high-growth industries, making CTE pathways critical to the region's economic vitality.

Our goal remains to create a faster way forward and to ensure every student is set up for a path to economic independence. Investing in West-MEC yields a powerful economic ripple effect that

strengthens the community, aligns with local labor market demands, and ensures sustained prosperity.