



Public Policy Update – March 2026

Feature: HB551 / SB737 - Expanding Pathways for Skilled Trades

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Employers across the Peninsula and the Commonwealth are feeling the squeeze... Not enough qualified workers, not enough training capacity, and not enough “on-ramps” for Virginians who are ready to work but need alternative pathways to gain in-demand skills.

That’s the real-world backdrop for HB551 (Del. Jessica Anderson) and SB737 (Sen. Danny Diggs). These companion bills focused on creating a state recognition pathway for high-quality, nondegree workforce training programs, with the goal of better aligning training with industry needs and expanding access for underserved populations.

What follows is the story of how the issue emerged, how the Peninsula Chamber chose to lead, why we made it bipartisan from the start, what we learned during the legislative process, and how we plan to keep working collaboratively toward a bill that will pass with broad support next session.

The Genesis: A Capacity Problem and a Student Access Problem

Over the past year, the Chamber has heard a consistent message from employers, workforce partners, and community leaders.

- Virginia needs more training capacity, not less.
- Training must be responsive to real labor market needs.
- Too many capable Virginians, especially working adults, career-changers, military transitioners, and those facing barriers to traditional education, need additional pathways that are both affordable, and schedule-friendly.

Leading the charge on that front has been our member, **Dave Gillespie of Virginia Technical Academy** in Newport News who brought us the idea and raised awareness about the issue.

Community colleges and registered apprenticeships remain essential pillars of our system. At the same time, Virginia’s economic reality demands a larger toolkit. In many industries, nondegree, skills-focused programs (including those run by private providers) can help fill gaps quickly... IF the programs are high-quality, outcome-driven, and aligned with employer demand.

That “if” matters. The Chamber’s focus from the outset was not to create a shortcut, but to help build a quality-centered pathway that benefits students and employers alike.

Why the Chamber Took It Up (Hint: It's All About the Students!)

The Peninsula Chamber decided to engage because this issue fits both our mission and our region's needs:

- Regional competitiveness: Employers can't grow, or even sustain operations, without talent.
- Upward mobility: Students and workers need pathways that lead to real jobs and wages.
- Equity of access: Some Virginians are less likely to access traditional routes

The goal of HB551/SB737 was straightforward... to establish a state-recognized pathway under the Secretary of Labor for nondegree workforce training programs offered by privately owned & operated trade schools (including minimum standards and reporting requirements for those institutions).

The Strategic Decision: Make It Bipartisan on Purpose

From the beginning, the Chamber approached this as a workforce issue, not a partisan issue.

That's why we intentionally chose a bipartisan patron strategy:

- House: Delegate Jessica Anderson (D) carried the bill as HB551.
- Senate: Senator Danny Diggs (R) carried the companion as SB737.
- Special shout-out to Delegate Shelly Simonds (D) for serving as Chief Co-Patron in the House. She helped us bring on other important co-patrons and she convened a critical meeting with Virginia's new Secretary of Labor, Jessica Looman and Commissioner of Virginia Works, Nicole Overley.

We wanted to send a clear signal that Virginia's workforce capacity and student access challenges require durable, coalition-backed solutions. A bill like this must be built to last, and must be shaped by a broad set of voices and supported by stakeholders across the spectrum.

Momentum, Questions, and Refinement

As the bills moved, they generated real engagement... both in support and in terms of thoughtful questions from other stakeholders.

At its core, the proposal directed the Dept. of Labor/Virginia Works to establish a recognition pathway for nondegree workforce training programs, with the explicit purpose of aligning workforce skills to industry needs and expanding access for underserved populations.

Like many policy efforts that involve education, labor, and economic development, the bills raised legitimate stakeholder concerns, including:

- How to ensure quality and accountability without creating unnecessary bureaucracy.
- How to avoid duplicative oversight across agencies and existing systems.
- How this pathway should relate to (and not undermine) community colleges and labor-aligned registered apprenticeship programs.
- How to define terms, outcomes, and standards in a way that earns confidence from a wide coalition.

In the House, those discussions played out publicly as the bill advanced through subcommittee, reporting with a substitute on a 6–3 bipartisan vote.

That subcommittee step mattered: it reflected both momentum and the reality that stakeholder alignment and implementation details still needed work.

Progress, but Not the Finish Line

HB551's key milestone was its movement through subcommittee, where it was recommended with substitute and sent onward, but later the bill was continued to next session in the House Committee on General Laws.

SB737 was continued to next session in Senate General Laws and Technology on a 15–0 committee vote, with a directive from then-Chair Senator Adam Ebbin to Virginia Works to work with stakeholders and bring back a bill in 2027 that accomplishes the mission and carries broad support. Senators broadly agreed the issue is worth solving, even as the details require more consensus-building.

The takeaway: the General Assembly **validated the importance of the problem** and wants to see a resolution.

It's worth restating the Chamber's "north star" here: students and workers.

This policy is especially important for Virginians who are motivated to build a stable career but may be less likely to access other pathways, whether due to:

- work schedules and family obligations,
- transportation challenges,
- limited educational attainment (no high-school degree or equivalent)
- or simply needing an alternative, job-connected option.

When thoughtfully structured, nondegree workforce programs can be a practical bridge into good jobs... particularly in skilled trades and other high-demand fields. A state recognition pathway can help ensure those programs meet meaningful standards, can be understood by employers, and can connect more reliably to workforce systems.

Next Steps: A Summer of Stakeholder Work and a Bill Built to Pass

The approach from here is simple: do the hard, collaborative work now so the next bill can clear the finish line.

Over the summer and into the fall, we will continue convening and working with key stakeholders, including workforce agencies, education partners, employers, and other affected parties. In other words, we are doing what responsible policy leadership requires. We are taking the legislative feedback seriously, strengthening the framework, and coming back next session with a bill that reflects shared priorities and can pass.