

Technical education the solution to state's high dropout rate

By Paul R. Hay

Article Launched: 08/11/2008 01:32:18 AM PDT

The California Department of Education has reported that one in four students who start high school will drop out. While not new information, it validates what educators have known through independent studies and observations.

So, what do we do now that we have more accurate numbers?

A 2006 study by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ("The Silent Epidemic") reported that 47 percent of former students who dropped out said classes were not interesting, while 81 percent called for real world learning opportunities. Eighty-eight percent had passing grades when they dropped out.

A major recommendation from this study is that, "Instead of the usual 'one size fits all' school, districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom with real life experiences and with work."

The "one size fits all" strategy suggests that all high school students should be prepared to attend college. Sacramento policy-makers have placed their emphasis and funding on "A-G" college preparatory curriculum, and use high-stakes testing to measure performance. To try to succeed in this environment, students end up taking an array of

required and recommended courses, including remediation courses. There's little time for much else.

Tragically, this educational strategy doesn't fit reality, or the needs of the state's workforce. The California Employment Development Department expects 6.5 million new job openings by 2014. Three-quarters of these jobs will require a high level of technical literacy and training, while only a quarter will require a bachelor's degree or higher.

Vocational programs, now known as Career Technical Education (CTE), provide students with relevant, hands-on learning opportunities. Problematically, during the last 20 years, CTE programs have declined more than 50 percent as high schools emphasized academics and college preparation. CTE labs have been converted to academic classrooms; expensive equipment has been sold at a fraction of its value and the number of credentialed CTE teachers has fallen precipitously. And now, a substantial majority of students leave high school without the technical skills to earn a decent living.

This trend must be reversed. Balance must be restored. High school students must have the opportunity to graduate with a marketable skill, whether or not they choose to go on to post-secondary education. Underfunded for years, the state's 74 Regional Occupational Centers and Programs are finally being recognized by our state leaders as a central player in bringing hands-on, applied learning and career opportunities to our high school students.

Regional Occupational Centers and Programs offer nearly 100 career pathways and programs, career counseling and guidance, work-based learning and placement assistance. They open doors to many options, including college, apprenticeship and well-paying jobs.

While Regional Occupational Centers and Programs are only part of the answer to fully integrating CTE into California education, they have an already proven track record. Research studies show that students who take classes in vocational programs have lower dropout rates, earn

higher wages than comparison peer groups, enroll in post-secondary education in large numbers and have a better understanding of the value and relevance of educational opportunities.

Santa Clara County has CTE courses at nearly all its comprehensive high schools, including rigorous career programs at the Central County Occupational Center on Hillsdale Avenue in San Jose.

But these programs are limited in both funding and the number of students they can serve. It doesn't make sense to limit funding and capacity for a proven program, especially now that official numbers confirm the crisis in California education.

The current system isn't working. CTE needs to be fully integrated into the high school curriculum. We need to provide our young people with more choices and the skills to obtain and succeed in well-paying jobs. We need balance, and the state should dedicate the resources to make it happen.

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