

Why Vocational Education Works

by Sue Ellen Warren, Guest columnist. Saturday, January 29, 2005

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Thank you, Dan Walters of the Sacramento Bee, for your column "Bolstering Voc-ed at Last" [*Comment, Jan. 18*]. You remind us that not all high school graduates enter college and many who begin college do not receive a bachelor's degree. Society would not be well served, even if everyone obtained bachelor's degrees. We need, and pay very well for, a skilled work force. Your strong defense of vocational education is appreciated.

As a lifelong vocational educator (Home Economics, Michigan State University), may I describe several other advantages of high school and community college vocational education, now called career-technical education (CTE).

1. Many college students must help finance their education. ROP and vocational classes provide exposure and training for skilled work. Skilled students can command \$20 or more per hour, instead of laboring at minimum wage.
1. Vocational education directly supports post-secondary education.
2. Vocational educators apply basic academic skills to the "real world."
3. Technical reading is challenging and sometimes more engaging than literature.
4. Applied math and science is more readily grasped than work sheets. The student begins to understand "why I gotta know this stuff."
2. Educators are challenged to respect all types of student diversity. The most important diversity in school is that of multiple intelligences. Equal opportunity, respect and training should be given the artistic brain, the kinesthetic brain, the verbal brain, etc. As honest educators, we cannot force all students into one mold.
3. All learners benefit by engaging the 'other side of the brain.' Learning is more than a work sheet. Literacy and math skills come to life in the arts and practical arts, and skills and abilities are discovered.
4. A respect for all types of intelligence is born and bred in vocational education. I have seen honors students struggle with a simple project. They gain great respect for a peer who may not have a 4.0 but can take apart and repair an engine or construct a detailed garment. There is dignity in honest labor and great value in practical skills.
5. Not all students learn best from pencil and paper tasks. Vocational classes provide unique opportunities for academic success. Often, success in a vocational class is the "hook" that keeps a student in high school the entire four years. Hey, it works!
6. High schools and community colleges that offer meaningful elective classes provide exposure to fields of study that often become vocations. The student then enters college with some idea of his talents, skills and interests; some idea of "what I want to be when I grow up." This gives focus and meaning to studies. The student who attends college only because he passed the test often wastes time and resources.
7. The latest mandate for education is expressed as "No Child Left Behind."
5. Purely academic curriculum, high stakes testing and "college-for-all" leaves many, many students behind. The role of schools is to prepare students for life. That is best done with a healthy mix of academic and vocational classes along with the arts, insuring that no child is ever left behind.

I am proud to work at a school that offers a good selection of arts, practical arts and ROP work experience classes. Yes, these classes cost taxpayer money. Yes, some see them as expensive extras that don't lead directly into college. But we keep students engaged in school, help them discover their talents, teach to all learning styles and prove the necessity of reading, math and science skills. That, my friends, is a great service to the educational process and to society.

— Sue Ellen Warren of Long Beach teaches vocational classes at Bellflower High School and El Camino College.