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Commentary

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'Career Diplomas' Are Not a Lesser Option

By Jeffrey V. Bohl

I want to tell you about a school where students have life-changing educational experiences—more of them, and more often, than at any other school I've known. And I've known many schools and taught many different students—from 9th grade repeaters in the urban core of Miami to international award-winners at a public math and science academy in Michigan. I've also been a high school administrator in both urban and rural districts. And through all of this, one school stands out.

It is a smallish, specialty high school whose graduates are constantly returning to campus to visit with teachers, share their accomplishments, and thank staff members for their positive influence on their lives. This happens to be the school where I now work—the [Capital Area Career Center](#), near Michigan's capital of Lansing—and it has given me an educator's greatest blessing: to be involved in an organization that changes lives for the better.

The school is a career-and-technical-education center that serves 11 public school districts. Its story is emblematic of CTE programs, which survive and thrive despite the nation's currently stunted conversation about the value of career-oriented education.

I cringed, for example, when I read a Dec. 2, 2009, *Education Week* [article](#) on the adoption by the Louisiana legislature of a new “career diploma” option for high schoolers. Though I don't support a bifurcated diploma system, I could appreciate the Louisiana policymakers' intent, and I was troubled by the alarmist concerns raised by critics of the measure. They argued that offering a career diploma would represent a lowering of standards and expectations for students who aren't headed to a four-year college. The same claims have been made recently during similar legislative debates in Michigan.

It is the kind of political dialogue that signals a lack of understanding about the quality of and need for career and technical education. And it lacks the depth and detail needed to communicate the true value of this schooling option.

One reason conversations about career education tend to be so simplistic is that many of those doing the talking don't have the life experiences that would help them understand the issues. As someone who worked as a tooling engineer before becoming a teacher, I am regularly surprised by the lack of cross-sector understanding in education. Non-CTE educators often have no experience working outside of schools, in business, for example. Policymakers, meanwhile, usually have no experience as educators (and often lack business experience themselves). Those

in both groups, moreover, have usually taken a strictly academic route through postsecondary education. They tend to espouse this as the one, best solution for everyone. They are not familiar with, and so don't fully understand, the value of other routes to career success, such as two-year postsecondary degrees, state and national industry-certification programs, apprenticeships, and others.

Four important points usually get lost in conversations about career and technical education. The first is that academic standards are not the only type of standards that can be called "high." In CTE programs, performance standards are often set by state and national industry organizations, and the tests that high school students take are actual industry-entrance tests.

These are high standards—the standards businesses require. Many CTE critics, however, talk as if only purely academic standards are worthy yardsticks of success. Anything else is somehow a "lower" standard. This might make sense to those who have not been held to high standards of product or output in business or industry. But it makes no sense to CTE teachers, who (at least in Michigan) have to have industry experience, and thus be able to understand the real world of job-related performance standards.

Second, rigor is not only an academics-related concept. Rigor in teaching is about clear focus and depth of understanding. At my school, for example, histology students are taught in rigorous ways about making medical slides. This can result in their gaining expertise, publishing in health journals, or presenting at health-care conferences. Likewise, our (high-needs) custodial-services students are taught with rigor about facilities maintenance and ensuring that work areas are safe and clean, something they take deserved pride in doing well. All of our students, through skilled teaching, high expectations, and rigorous training, are stretched in the same ways that my award-winning math-and-science-academy students are.

The third overlooked point is that rigor is not equivalent to higher coursework. This confusion has huge and very real ramifications for student opportunities. For example, Michigan now requires students to take Algebra 2 to graduate from high school. Business people apparently complain about graduates who pass algebra, yet are not facile with mathematics. Solving this real problem requires rigorous instruction in all mathematics, not a higher math course. Deep understanding of the concepts in Algebra 1 would suffice for all but a small proportion of jobs. But since policymakers can't legislate rigorous teaching, they legislate more courses to compensate. Forcing all students to take a course like Algebra 2—multiple times if necessary—can eliminate chances for them to take potentially more valuable CTE courses. This is a trade-off that reduces some students' career opportunities.

Finally, comprehensive high schools do not serve all students as well as is possible. Young people come to high school with many different interests, aptitudes, and passions. Some of those are best satisfied with academically focused courses that serve as building blocks to advanced academic work. Other interests, aptitudes, and passions are better served with real-life, career-oriented, and authentic education in settings that provide students access to up-to-date technology and interactions with business and industrial partners. Students who are naturally engaged in their learning succeed at higher levels and with fewer struggles. Anyone who walks

through the halls of a CTE school experiences the palpable difference that being surrounded by highly engaged students can produce.

Many CTE students excel in advanced academic coursework in high school. Others do not. Some go on to complete four-year degrees. Others do not. The vast majority, though, are put on a path to success. CTE provides opportunities that match many students' passions with the necessary knowledge and skills they will need to make them part of a successful career.

In the debate about standards, we need a language that honors the value of career and technical education. We need conversations that don't define CTE as the lesser option set against academics-only education. It is not a lesser option, it is a different option. It is not a less rigorous option, it is simply related to different content. And its standards are not lower. They are often higher, and much more "real life," in the truest sense of the term.

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