

Renaissance of Technical Education in Kansas

Many years ago in my junior year of high school I wrote a term paper on A Nation at Risk, a 1983 US Department of Education report that asserted that American schools were failing and that we needed a new emphasis in, among other things, college preparation. Yes, even back then I was interested in learning about educational matters while my buddies were writing papers about whether the three point line should be added to high school basketball or if New Coke will replace Pepsi. I was an education nerd.

The report really shook up many in K-12 education in the country and many schools began to focus on college prep. Here was a common question that was asked by counselors, “Are you college-bound or not college-bound?” Many parents wanted their kid to go to college to be a doctor, lawyer, teacher, engineer, artist, etc. Most didn’t want their kid to be a welder or a mechanic, or a manufacturer. They wanted, “My son, the doctor.” (Ok in all fairness, my Mom gets to say this now that I have my doctorate, and I have kids of my own, so I certainly understand that pride aspect.) I believe that a stigma began to form about students that took technical education classes. At high school graduations across the county even to this day, do the administrations brag about how many students are certified in a technical area, or how many Ivy League acceptances and university scholarships were received? Stigma.

Resources were moved into classes designed to help students get ready to earn that bachelor’s degree. But where were the resources taken from?

Technical education began to shrink at many schools across the country. Many high schools, even in rural areas where I grew up had electronics, welding, auto mechanics, even heating and air-conditioning repair. Then they didn’t.

Flash forward today, after one of the worst economic disasters in US history. Many students leave high school with a very necessary diploma but do not choose to go on for that bachelor’s degree and have no certified workplace skills to sell to a prospective employer. After 20+ years in higher education I can tell you that not everyone is cut out to get a bachelor’s degree. And if everyone did, who would fill all of those important and great paying jobs that technical education can help prepare you for? There are people out of work. And there are well-paying jobs to be had, but no qualified workforce as a result. I believe that the A Nation at Risk, and the parental stigma against technical education is partially to blame. By the way, you are not going to find technical education on the state wide tests that all students have to take. You get what you test for.

However, things are changing!

There is a renaissance or rebirth in technical education currently underway in Kansas and it is exciting to watch. Spurred on by some important legislation last year that helps pay for the tuition of high school students, community colleges across the state are joining forces with high schools to offer a wide range of certified technical programs for students concurrently enrolled in high schools. Thanks to the improved offerings students in their 20s, 30s and on up are also getting more opportunities to become trained for a new career.

NCCC is at the forefront of this renaissance. About 40% of all of the credit hours produced by the College are in technical education. NCCC boasts the second largest two-year nursing program in Kansas. We also have a vibrant certified nursing assistant program as well as other health care offerings such as surgical technology, occupational therapy, medical assistant, and health information technology.

The College provides programs in welding and construction for Chanute Public Schools. In fact, our program has produced the State Champion welder for four years in a row! We have built two houses in Chanute and many cabins for Greenbush educational cooperative.

We are applying this model elsewhere beginning fall 2013. Neosho County Community College and Anderson County Schools is launching the Eastern Kansas Rural Technology Center located in Garnett. Area school districts will be able to send students to Garnett to earn their certification in welding and, beginning in 2014, construction. High school students in our northern service area that are interested in health care careers can attend our Ottawa Campus and take classes in the simulated hospital, the finest health care lab in the State of Kansas (or so I have been told). The legislation, SB 155, pays for all of the transportation costs of the school districts to and from the technical education sites. The cost is very minimal as the school district had the unused building and is giving the college free rent. Free is my favorite expense.

Along with Kansas City Kansas Community College and Johnson County Community College we are in talks with Lawrence Public Schools to bring additional technical educational opportunities to that community as well.

I am hoping that with this rebirth that counselors across the country drop that “college bound or not college bound” question and replace it with this idea: Everyone should be post-secondary education-bound. Everyone should go to college, maybe it is for a technical certificate, or maybe it is for a doctorate in education, but everyone should go. And fellow parents, instead of “my son or daughter, the doctor” maybe we should want to say, “my child, the employed.”

As always I welcome your thoughts and questions at binbody@neosho.edu.