

It's Time to Dispel the Myth of the Career- Ready High School



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Unlike old-fashioned vocational education, high school-level career and technical education doesn't really prepare people for jobs directly after high school. While the stated end goal of K-12 education in America is for students to be "college and career ready," the reality is the existence of career-ready high school graduates is a myth. The expectation that high school produces career-ready adults in a 21st century economy is unrealistic and counterproductive.

While there have been efforts to revive vocational training in high school, it has become clear that, for today's students to be prepared for tomorrow's jobs, all pathways must lead to a credential with labor market value, such as a certificate, associate's degree or bachelor's degree. Good jobs that only required a high school education, in blue-collar fields and the military, have declined, while the jobs that took their place in fields like health care, information technology and business services require more than a high school education.

On average, CTE courses comprise only 2.5 out of the 27 credits high school students earn, not nearly enough coursework to prepare students for an entry-level job with a career ladder. What's more: CTE "concentrators" – that is, students who take at least three CTE courses – and who don't go on to obtain a college degree, certificate or certification earn 90 cents more per hour than non-concentrators.

This matters because – as we've shown through research here at the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce – half of young adults are failing to successfully launch their careers. If we fail to recognize that the game has changed, and that high school is no longer enough, we will also fail to prepare future generations for tomorrow's jobs.

Since the 1980s, the relationship between education and careers has changed in other profound ways. The narrow job-specific training provided by traditional vocational courses, such as auto mechanics, was no longer enough in an economy where skill requirements were constantly rising at a fast pace. In modern economies, narrow vocational preparation at the high school level leaves workers without enough general education to land middle-class jobs.

Recent developments in federal policy, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, are not enough to meet the challenge of helping the forgotten half of young Americans. The act includes the words "career readiness," but the career-ready high school graduate only exists in the collective imagination. Similarly, reauthorizing the Perkins Act, the chief federal funding source for CTE, would be a positive step. Ultimately, however, the major reforms must take place at the state or regional level.

In the best cases, a handful of states, like Delaware and Tennessee, are successfully developing pathways to in-demand careers. Middle school students are exploring careers that suit their talents and interests. High school students are gaining employability skills and practical work experience in career fields so that they are ready to shop for postsecondary programs in their junior year.

We must scale up this new model in more states and cities across the country and invest more in programs that connect education to work. Only then will we reach the forgotten half of young adults who aren't making it in today's economy.

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