

## Technical Skills Training Leads to Jobs

In New York City, with a graduation rate that still hovers around 50 percent for blacks and Latinos, with few achieving a Regents diploma - which is accepted as the minimum needed to really compete for higher wage, higher skilled jobs – there is a lack of the technical skills necessary to compete for jobs that pay well.

A few years ago the Community Service Society inserted specific educational questions in its citywide survey, “The Unheard Third,” which with over a thousand respondents is the largest annual survey of low-income respondents conducted in the country. We asked what would be the improvement in the schools they would most like to see. People came back with “better teacher salaries,” “smaller class size,” and **“a focus on vocational education.”**

### Integrating Knowledge

To be ready for a career in our labor market, students who are not going on to college need to be able to integrate technical knowledge and skills with core academic knowledge. In our changing economy, even the most technical job today requires basic literate and numeric skills.

Vocational education, now known as career and technical education (CTE), was once a separate “track” in our high schools. The city’s Department of Education has vowed to make sure that CTE students still get basic academic instructions.

Mayor Bloomberg convened a Task Force on Career and Technical Education Innovation, which made its recommendations in a July 2008 report. I was a member of that task force.

About 140,000 students in the city’s public high schools are enrolled in vocational education classes. Most take courses in general education high schools.

The city has 39 CTE schools, with about 30,000 students enrolled in them. With an annual budget of about \$250 million, CTE schools, on average, were funded at per student rates that were a bit lower than other public high schools. Despite having poorer students who enter high school with lower skill levels on average, CTE schools in New York City often graduate their students at higher rates than other high schools. Historically, though, these schools have been generally left to their own devices with little centralized support.

Educational outcomes from career and technical programs are changing. The road to college for many young people, particularly those from low-income families with little college in their family history, often goes through work after high school. Young people often need employment to learn the relevance of college to their advancement.

Presently, the city offers programs in its CTE schools in automotive repair, aviation maintenance, electronic technology, welding, construction, and plumbing, among many others. Students

graduating from these courses should be entering a pipeline to well-paying jobs through apprenticeship programs in various industries.

### **Unions as Partners**

In many cases, this means bringing in trade unions as a partner to the educational process. Unfortunately, the history of some of these unions has been to exclude people of color. Given the fact that nearly 80 percent of the city's high school students are black or Latino and, thus, are likely to form the overwhelming number of CTE students, this potential roadblock to work after school must be closely monitored by the city.

CTE has long been misunderstood, and suffered from a lack of support from politicians who are afraid of efforts that might imply that some students are not college material. With funding from the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, the Community Service Society is starting a research project that seeks to examine how certain types (not all) of CTE programs can actually increase college-going, and we are working with the city's Department of Education to better understand and identify these types of programs.

The time has come when we must be serious about career and technical high schools and post high school training that leads to economic and social advancement. We certainly cannot continue the way we are going now with the vast majority of black and Latino young people dropping out or graduating with no useful skills to participate in this new economy.

Mayor Bloomberg has only 15 months left in office. The next mayor must ensure that CTE is a continuing educational priority. This should begin by determining the education plans of those New Yorkers who are running for mayor.

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