

School districts retool for career tech studies

College prep blends with job training

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Sometimes it's unclear which of Manuel Santos' classes are college prep and which are vocational. Last year, he took medical terminology, classified as vocational but heavy on the advanced vocabulary he'll need if he majors in pre-med in college.

And though the Sweetwater High School senior has taken all the advanced science courses he needs to be admitted to his top college choice, the University of California Berkeley, it may be another vocational course, medical assistant training, that is best preparing him for pre-med.

National City's Sweetwater High and schools across San Diego County are developing a new brand of education that is a hybrid of college-prep and job training, a series of classes that will equip high school graduates to simultaneously impress employers and university admissions counselors.

New and more sophisticated job-training classes have emerged as a response to calls from industry for a skilled, homegrown work force and the rising awareness of a dropout epidemic among students who don't find school relevant.

Funding increased

The movement has received a boost from Sacramento, too.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has championed what is now known as career technical education, citing business courses he took in high school as vital to his success in the entertainment industry.

Schwarzenegger also has presided over an 18 percent increase in funding for career technical education over the past two years, said Scott Himmelstein, a former member of the Schwarzenegger administration. Last year, state funding for career technical education programs was about \$650 million, according to the California Department of Education.

"It's one of the few places in a miserable state budget situation where there are actually increased state dollars," Himmelstein said. Himmelstein was Schwarzenegger's interim secretary of education before he returned to San Diego last year to become director of the the University of San Diego's Center for Education Policy and Law.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Career technical education is targeted for students such as Luis Vargas Jr., who cut metal in a welding and metal fabrication class at Sweetwater High School.

Real-world connections

Traditional vocational education, which prepared students who didn't intend to go to college for blue-collar jobs, has turned into career technical education, which equips students with technical and academic skills to pursue higher education or to adapt to the changes in the industry they enter.

To capture the new both-sides-of-the-aisle approach, the San Diego Unified School District last year renamed its vocational education department. It's now known as College, Career and Technical Education. Poway Unified's career education department is redesigning its courses so that all of them will qualify students for college credit, industry certification or completion of a University of California prerequisite.

"I think there's really this false dichotomy between saying 'college-ready' and 'career ready,'" said Kathleen Porter, director of Career, Technical and Adult Education for the Poway Unified School District. "Having real-world connections in academic classes is every bit as important as having real-world classes reinforce academic skills."

At Poway High, Advanced Placement physics students supplement their lectures on electrical circuits by visiting the school's auto shop to see the circuits at work. And as a result of consulting with the physics teacher, auto shop teacher Ken Faverty said he teaches his students more about multiple circuits to reinforce classroom concepts they will face on state science tests.

Himmelstein is trying to accelerate the movement.

He convened a summit on career technical education last month at the San Diego County Office of Education to start a regionwide conversation on job-training education. At the summit, Himmelstein released a University of San Diego report, which states that local schools receive \$68 million in job-training funding annually but in a time of budget crisis may be leaving money on the table because educators can't penetrate the thicket of California school finance rules.

USD also unveiled what Himmelstein calls an online funding map that shows where the state and federal job-training money is and how to get it. It's money that the movement will need to add classes, recruit and train teachers and convert classrooms into workshops.

Relevance to students

The money could go a long way at Sweetwater High, where the new sports medicine class is held in a converted girls' locker room that still has shower stalls and a cage at the back of the room from which mariachi students retrieve their instruments during the early minutes of class.

The unconventional environment didn't prevent 17-year-old senior Alfredo Trujillo from successfully taping the ankle of classmate Berenice Lepe during a two-minute drill last week. They will soon be student trainers for the school's football team.

"Right now I'm working at McDonald's, but I don't really like it," Alfredo said. "So maybe I can get a job related to this."

Himmelstein believes career technical education is crucial to training students for jobs in emerging industries and to lowering dropout rates.

Based on the first-time use of individual student data, the state in July reported a county dropout rate of 22.9 percent, a number far higher than previous estimates. The state rate is 24 percent.

The selling point of job-training classes by any name has been their relevance.

“This answers the age-old question in school, 'When am I ever going to use this?' ” Sweetwater High Principal Wes Braddock said during a visit to a medical assistant training class.

Braddock has more than 400 students in career technical education classes.

Areli Hernandez takes the class because she wants to be a doctor, and she doesn't have to wait until college to see the relevance of the class.

“You can also help your family when there's not a doctor at home with the skills you learn here,” said Areli, a 17-year-old senior.

Among the state's high school graduates, about 26 percent statewide immediately enroll at a four-year college, according to the California Postsecondary Commission.

“What is happening with these other kids? Are we giving them an option of college or career and making (school) relevant enough to keep them engaged?” Himmelstein said.