

Readers' Forum: Need new ways of looking at schools

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Guest Commentary

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While unemployment rates remain stubbornly high in Contra Costa County, there is another grim reality we cannot ignore. Figures released this month by the California Department of Education indicate that more than one in five students – 22 percent – in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District drop out of school.

As a parent with three children in the district, I find this statistic alarming. As a businessman, I know this data is indicative of the trouble companies have in finding highly skilled workers to fill jobs. As a local policymaker, I am proud to say that there are efforts underway within the district and throughout California to address both the dropout crisis and the challenge of preparing all of our youth for the modern workforce.

According to a report by national

business leader organization *America's Edge*, employers say that even applicants with a four-year college degree are entering the workforce under-prepared. So it is no surprise that those who are coming straight out of high school are even less prepared for careers in today's knowledge-based economy. Dropouts have even fewer options and, unfortunately, many turn to crime, which further burdens our economy and depletes our local resources.

Not every high school student must go on to a four-year university, but every student should have the opportunity to do so. Every student should also be prepared for the world beyond school. With or without a degree, job seekers must enter the workforce as communicators, collaborators and critical thinkers.

In an effort to achieve these goals and ensure that public education in the 21st century is relevant, schools around the state have turned to a model that links academics with career-technical education and work-based learning opportunities.

Recently, I visited the Architecture, Construction, Manufacturing and Engineering (ACME) Academy at Mt. Diablo High School in Concord. The 156 students in the program receive their core subjects – English, math and science – through the lens of this particular industry sector, which helps keep them interested and engaged in school. The integration and cross-subject projects allow them to see the connection between what they are learning in school and how it applies to the real world.

The students I spoke to were

enthusiastic about the work they were doing. They relished the challenges of developing and executing their work plans. They were confident and proud of their accomplishments. It was clear they were applying traditional high school subjects in a way that resonated with them and reinforced their pursuits. It was inspiring to see kids having fun while actively learning.

The ACME Academy is supported by partnerships with Chevron, USS-POSCO Industries, the Contra Costa Water District, and the local carpenters, electricians, mechanics and pipefitters unions, which provide industry support and curriculum guidance. But ACME is just one local example. Other Linked Learning academies are based on California's biggest industries, such as information technology, health science, law, and hospitality – and each academy has its own industry partners.

Research shows that these programs are working. Nationally, high-risk students who participate in Career Academies are far less likely to drop out of school. Participating students go on to work 12 percent more hours per week and earn 11 percent more money than students not in the program.

Yet too often, such academies are dismissed as niche programs intended for kids who cannot succeed in a mainstream, college-track curriculum.

So-called "vocational education" has become a negative term, synonymous with underachievement and limitations. Such thinking is outdated and misses the critical point that our current approach is failing to produce the relevant, contemporary, and effective education all of our students need to become better prepared to compete in our global economy.

As our times are new, we must think anew and look to new models and approaches to most effectively prepare all of our children for the world in which we live.

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