

Technical Education Looks to the Past and the Future in Massachusetts

By Judy Bass

THE YEAR 2008 MARKED THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INCEPTION OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN MASSACHUSETTS.

That milestone surely occasioned a great deal of reflection on the past, but it should also inspire students, families, educators and citizens to continue looking eagerly to the future. Career and technical education (CTE) has evolved tremendously over the past several years as a result of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System testing, changes in the global economy, the shifting professional goals of young people, and the fluctuating job market. The current national economic downturn has rocked the status quo still more.

Blue Hills Regional Technical School, located in Canton, is extremely proud to have remained in the vanguard of all these significant changes. The institution provides academic instruction with valuable practical context. The school also fosters a stimulating environment where traditional programs exist side by side with dynamic new offerings like cutting-edge 21st century robotics and engineering.

For young men and women who are hands-on learners and seek a robust high school experience that gives them a solid foundation in academics, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, professional training, and the team concept of problem solving, technical education is ideal. They will be challenged, tested and gratified as never before. There are numerous other benefits as well. All incoming freshmen have an opportunity to explore each of the 16 career pathways the school offers. Not only do they develop an ap-

preciation of the world of work, but they often discover that the profession they believe they want might not be right for them after all. How much better to find that out while you're still in high school rather than when you're in college after spending thousands of dollars!

From the moment a ninth-grade student enters Blue Hills, there is a direct connection established between his or her education and military, employment or postsecondary experience; this includes apprentice programs, licensure programs, and two-, three- and four-year college programs. It's amazing how students integrate the elements of their education to formulate a custom-tailored strategy for success. One 2006 graduate studied engineering and cosmetology, became a licensed hairdresser, and is now in college in Rhode Island learning business management because she intends to someday design and run her own beauty salon. Examples like that are the norm, not the exception.

Academic instruction is now a major part of a technical school student's preparation. Employers want to hire job applicants equipped with a wide spectrum of knowledge. It's no longer adequate to know, for example, only metal fabrication, auto repair or culinary arts and little or nothing about world literature or history. Having a strong grounding in English, math, science and social studies is necessary to excel in today's ultra-competitive marketplace, and is absolutely essential for those who switch careers later on. Globalization has become the watchword of contemporary education.

Technical high schools like Blue Hills

are already well positioned to cope with the challenge of globalization. We currently address the intellectual and practical areas of our students' training. Now we can insert these other vital areas into a broad and viable context of academics and career skills; they all fit together perfectly.

The present volatility in our economy and the seismic effect that it has had upon economies worldwide rightly concerns all of us. We all wonder how it will affect our future and that of our children. What tools will they need to survive in a marketplace and workforce that are desperately trying to adapt to uncertain new realities?

Again, technical students are equipped to deal with this major upheaval. They graduate with a diploma which signifies their mastery of both academics and skills in their chosen field. One without the other is inadequate now. Both, however, constitute an ideal foundation to thrive in the climate we are in.

Technical education is not for everyone, just as the concept of "one size fits all" is not true in education in general. But for those who absorb and retain knowledge more effectively by participating in hands-on activities that reinforce it, who want to be trained in the career paths available, who desire high-caliber academics and who want to be ready to meet the myriad challenges of the 21st century, Blue Hills is definitely the place to be. ■

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