



THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: CTE HIGH SCHOOLS GIVE STUDENTS A DECISIVE EDGE

By Judy Bass

“IT GAVE US A LEG UP ON EVERYBODY ELSE,” IS THE WAY ONE GRADUATE OF MINUTEMAN HIGH School in Lexington, Massachusetts, describes the important edge he and his classmates had over their peers at non-career and technical education (CTE) high schools.

How does that “leg up,” or competitive advantage, as it is often called, benefit students from CTE high schools like Minuteman in terms of college and careers? Why is it more pivotal and sought after than ever by young men and women eager to differentiate themselves from thousands of college applicants and job seekers? And what does a competitive advantage signify in the always-changing 21st-century global economy?

Jason Crowdle knows, thanks to his own experience at Minuteman.

Crowdle, who studied horticulture there and graduated in 1999, realized as a youngster that he wanted to go into the landscaping business someday. He believes that Minuteman provided an ideal route to the success he enjoys today as the owner of a landscaping company which has nearly two dozen full-time employees and generates \$2 million in annual revenue. Crowdle’s achievements and prominence in the community led to his induction into the Minuteman Hall of Fame in 2015.

“Minuteman prepared us for the real world and real life,” he said, listing one topic after another that he and his classmates were introduced to and expected to master—turf management, planting techniques, equipment maintenance, foundation installation for a patio and much more. In addition, Crowdle noted, they practiced their skills at locations such as a local cemetery in Cambridge, where they did pruning and maintenance of the grounds.

Yet another useful opportunity he cited at Minuteman, an accredited member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), was the chance for students to earn professional licenses in related areas like pesticide application and operating heavy machinery. Crowdle also obtained a co-op job through Minuteman at a landscaping firm in Brighton where he “paid his dues” and learned the ropes by working alongside seasoned professionals.

“Minuteman opened a lot of doors a lot faster,” Crowdle said. “It was a great

beginning for me. I was years ahead of most 18-year-olds. It’s pushing you a little further, which most students don’t get until college.”

He credits his CTE coursework with influencing him in an even broader, more profound sense: “It laid the framework for me being who I am today.”

Tangible Benefits

The value of CTE is clearly gaining new recognition at a time when people are re-thinking the wisdom of getting an almost prohibitively costly four-year college education that may well leave them burdened with thousands of dollars of student loan debt, as well as no job or a low-paying one with limited upward mobility.

Familiarizing high school students with the requirements and expectations of the workplace, as Jason Crowdle was by his teachers at Minuteman, pays off significantly. The report *From Cradle to Career: Educating our Students for Lifelong Success*, which was issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in June

2012, stated that “... students who are able to gain experience and exposure to the world of work while in high school are better prepared to persist in and complete a postsecondary education and succeed in pursuing livable-wage careers.”

Student attendance improves also. A report from the Massachusetts DESE dated January 27, 2015, notes that CTE/technical and agricultural high schools in the state had a dropout rate of 1 percent versus the average statewide dropout rate of 2 percent. The dropout rate for Massachusetts’ 26 regional technical high schools, three county agricultural schools and one independent school (Smith) was just 0.7 percent, which the report identifies as “the lowest of any group of schools in Massachusetts.”

Chapter 74

CTE high schools offer Chapter 74 vocational programs, which are approved by the Massachusetts DESE, and have a level of depth and rigor far surpassing that of, for example, typical high school elective courses or even Advanced Placement classes.

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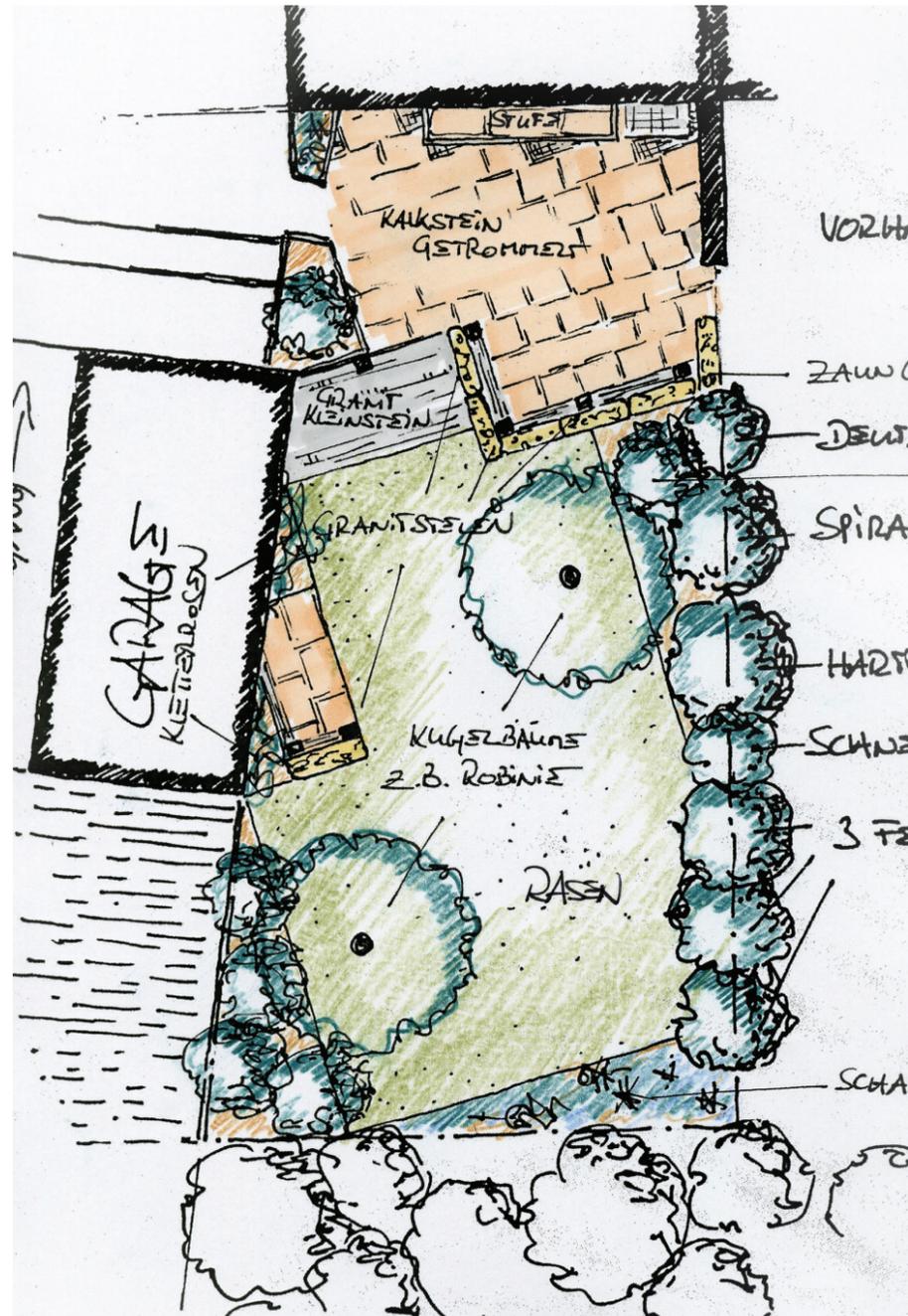
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“You can do anything once and that’s exposure,” said George Clement, Minuteman’s assistant principal and director of admissions. “But this is a whole different level. It’s a higher standard. We’re talking about turning students into prolific experts at a much younger age.”

Clement explained that the potent combination of Chapter 74 programs like those at Minuteman, plus intellectually challenging academics, yield “significant

business credentials” for students, credentials that truly make them stand out in the crowd.

He cited an example involving the school’s Environmental Science program. Students enrolled in it can take the OSHA 40-hour HAZWOPER course to become certified to deal with hazardous waste. Clement said that in Minuteman’s 16 member towns, there are 3,300 eighth-graders who will eventually apply

to college or enter the workforce. Of that entire group, he said, fewer than 30—the equivalent of just 1 percent—will be able to obtain this OSHA certification in high school because Minuteman is the sole place in its 16-town district preparing high school students for this training.

Having respected industry-standard certifications can be a major boost to a student’s candidacy for postsecondary education. Mark Perna, founder of Tools for Schools, an Ohio-based marketing and consulting company that advises schools nationwide including Minuteman, said that students who, for instance, take Auto Technology at Minuteman might want to eventually become automotive engineers or designers. Attaining that career goal would probably require a four-year college degree. Having ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) certification earned at Minuteman, that attests to a high level of proficiency in the fundamentals of the automotive field, would land a student “at the top of the list” to be admitted, Perna said.

“You become the right student for the next level of education,” Perna added. “You are way more competitive than someone with just academic knowledge. That’s the power that a place like Minuteman has.”

CTE high schools allow students to put their newly minted career skills to the test. Utilizing what they have learned in actual settings outside the classroom reinforces those skills in ways that impress employers and college admissions people alike.

For example, students in Construction or Carpentry may build houses and home additions for residents in their school district, as well as work on civic or municipal projects, thus seeing how what they do directly benefits the community. Early Education and Care students interact with young children in daycare settings within the school facility. Students in Culinary Arts work in their school’s restaurant, which is typically open to the public for lunch during the school year. They learn every aspect of the industry by performing different roles—sanitary handling and preparation of food, waitressing and hostessing, manning the cash register, dealing with the public, cooking, and creating nutritious, appealing menus.



Experiences to Remember

At Minuteman, all this is taken a step further by instructors who encourage students to have unique learning opportunities that they will always remember and that enhance their resumes.

Minuteman’s Environmental Science students helped create a rooftop garden at Boston’s legendary baseball stadium, Fenway Park, where herbs and vegetables are grown for the meals served to patrons. The school’s Girls in STEM Club, comprised of female Minuteman students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, hosts week-long camps at Minuteman for local middle school girls who want to further their inter-

est in STEM fields by being mentored, doing projects and experiments, and learning about STEM education and careers. This initiative, launched in 2015, has already garnered state and national awards while giving the Minuteman students the incomparable satisfaction of knowing they played a role in cultivating the next generation of successful female STEM professionals.

Whatever their area of concentration is, students are put through their paces instead of just passively watching their teacher at the blackboard, and the results show.

Chef Ed Cotton studied Culinary Arts at Minuteman, graduated in 1996 and then attended the Culinary Institute of America. He

has worked for some of the nation’s marquee chefs, among them Todd English, Daniel Boulud and Barbara Lynch. Cotton gained national recognition when he was the runner-up on Season 7 of the popular television cooking contest show *Top Chef*. Today, Cotton is executive chef at a well-known restaurant in New York. He is also a Minuteman Hall of Fame member. Despite all these heady credentials, he still gratefully recalls what helped catapult him to where he is now—his start years ago at Minuteman.

“Minuteman gave me a good base,” Cotton said. “It really prepared me for a dose of the real world.” Working the lunch service in the school’s student-run restaurant

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gave him, at an early age, “a taste of what service [in a restaurant] is really like. It was pretty valuable.”

The Competitive Advantage

At high schools like Minuteman, the combination of demanding academics and 21st-century CTE programs can be a springboard to either college or a career. “We offer the best of both worlds,” affirmed David Ferreira, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators. “Students have two pathways to future success—going to college or directly into the workforce to move up the career ladder. We’re the only ones who really have that. It gives a huge competitive advantage to students.”

“How do we know we are successful?” Ferreira asks, referring to CTE high schools. “Take a look at the numbers.” In the last five years, he said, there has been a 3 percent decline in the number of students of high school age in public schools in Massachusetts, but the number of students in Chapter 74 programs in schools of this type in Massachusetts has simultaneously risen by 6.5 percent. Many CTE/technical schools have lengthy waiting lists because they have more applicants than they can possibly accommodate.

Whether these high school students go directly into the workforce after graduation or seek further education, they are poised to succeed. Diploma in hand, they

also possess two other key components—professional qualifications and demonstrable real-world experience—that constitute the competitive advantage.

“Our students have the opportunity to explore careers in a much more studied and practical way,” stated Clement. “When they go to college, they know what resonates for them and can connect to a college that promotes that career. They’re ready for the next step and prepared for it.” **Tech**

Judy Bass is the communications specialist at two regional CTE high schools in Massachusetts—Minuteman High School in Lexington and Blue Hills Regional Technical School in Canton. E-mail her at j.bass@minuteman.org.

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