

## **Support Innovation in Career and Technical Education Programming**

In his recent guest column in this publication dated February 1, 2017, Superintendent Ricci of Chariho addressed a critical pathway for our local economy: the state of Career and Technical Education and the preparation of our future workforce. His advocacy for investment in high quality career and technical education centers is worthy of support, but is only one part of the solution to meeting the demands of having a well-educated, high quality workforce which can help the Rhode Island economy grow and prosper.

Twenty years ago, Career and Technical Education (CTE) in local high schools was most often perceived as being synonymous with pathways that did not lead to college or a well-paying career. Since then, auto shop, wood shop, and home economics have transitioned into advanced manufacturing, computer science, agriscience, culinary, and other college and career prep programs which lead to high skill, high wage professions. We now have the capacity to train the numerous high skill workers our business community wants and needs right here at home. How can this happen? By supporting not only the investment in career and technical centers throughout Rhode Island, but also by expanding our CTE capacity in our local communities.

We know that a having the knowledge and skills that lead to a lifetime of continuous learning is key to financial success, and that the four-year college pathway is not the right fit for every student. CTE, with its many options both within and outside of the traditional high school, college, and university model, is not only being revitalized in Rhode Island, but also becoming the cornerstone of an educational transformation. Our CTE programs require our students to have a strong STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) knowledge base, develop transferable skills, and problem solve in real-world situations. Through a CTE focus, our schools support efforts to recreate and reenergize our educational system and our employment opportunities across the state.

Over the past several years, many school districts have developed CTE programs which provide outstanding career opportunities for our students. These programs are approved by the Rhode Island Department of Education and are embedded in a local context so that students can stay in their community. The programs are high quality and are multifaceted so that students can follow different pathways to success. Unlike the traditional “CTE center” model where students travel to an often distant centralized location, the design of these new programs reflects the growth in our understanding of the ways in which students learn and their desire to synthesize many different educational opportunities.

Some have suggested that these locally developed high school programs cannot offer quality programming. That, of course, is simply not true. There are incredible career and technical education programs in our local high schools across the state, spanning fields such as engineering, construction, robotics, computer science, and manufacturing. We believe that our students not only learn well in places they know and are most comfortable, but that they also

are able to connect to the local businesses where we hope they will be employed, build careers, and, ultimately, expand opportunities for all.

Supporting expanded CTE programs is not an argument against adequately funding the regional centers which provide excellent experiences for the students who attend; in fact, their broad offerings are key to our state strategy and Career and Technical Education success. However, the structure and programming of our CTE centers is not the right fit for all students. Supporting local CTE options in focused programs gives students more choice and increased opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills needed in our high tech economy.

When addressing the educational needs of our communities, more worrisome than the sometimes disruptive pathway of change is no change at all. Allowing our local CTE programs to flourish is exactly what Harvard's Clayton Christenson meant when he stated that "Disruptive innovations create jobs, efficiency innovations destroy them." The efficiency and legacy of the CTE center has its well-deserved place in our educational landscape, but our economy in Rhode Island requires a boost from innovative programs which are developing at the local level. The combination of centralized CTE centers that invest in student learning at high cost training sites and local CTE pathways which offer less costly but equally important learning experiences is essential.

We view the future of Career and Technical Education as bright and full of promise. Career centers are essential for a broad and comprehensive secondary learning experience and should continue to be funded. However, we believe that individual school districts pursuing innovative student centered CTE programming should also be funded. A state-wide investment in both CTE centers and individual districts with CTE pathways is necessary, and such an approach must also support districts which are required to pay tuition to other school systems for CTE programming.

Our education system is poised to meet the needs of our employers and support a growing economy. "Shop" is a relic of the past, and having a "one size fits all" approach to Career and Technical Education should be as well.

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