NOT YOUR FATHER'S CTE

CTE, Career and Technical Education, is not what it used to be around the country. And that's something business should pay attention to. A skilled workforce is the name of the game in the future. Regions that have a skilled workforce will be the winners; regions that don't will be the whiners. Leading-edge career educational systems may spell the difference.

In New York, when business people think of CTE, most think of vocational education: automobile repair, beautician training, basic computer skills; things like that. That's what CTE traditionally meant; that's still what it means in much of New York.

In other places, CTE – usually called just CE, or Career Education – means something quite different. Take Nebraska, for example. The Nebraska Career Education (NCE) concept starts with core "foundation knowledge and skills" that each student is expected to learn. That includes, among other things, systems teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, as well as fundamental academic skills.

NCE then surrounds the core with six different career fields: Environmental and Agricultural Systems; Communication and Information Systems; Industrial, Manufacturing, and Engineering Systems; Health Sciences; Human Services and Resources; and Business, Marketing, and Management.

Each career field contains career "clusters," 16 in all. For example, the career field called Business, Marketing, and Management has four career clusters: Marketing, Sales, and Service; Business, Management, and Administration; Finance; and Hospitality and Tourism. Within each cluster are career "pathways." The Finance cluster is made up of Banking and Related Services; Business Financial Management; Financial Investment and Planning; and Insurance Services.

Nebraska educational policy integrates NCE into its public educational system. The curriculum includes programs of study based on the career fields and clusters, as well as hands-on learning experiences. The process of preparing Nebraska students for the world of work begins in Kindergarten and expands in detail and intensity as the students progress through school. During that process, each student is required to have a Personal Learning Plan, which includes a specific, but changeable, plan for career preparation.

In other words, Nebraska's K-12 educational system is designed to orient kids to careers in the working world from their earliest years. And throughout their educational experience, the idea of careers in specific industries in Nebraska is always part of their curriculum. That's real workforce development. It acknowledges the fact that, although academic enrichment is an important part of a fully rounded life, the educational system has to prepare young people for the world of work; and that preparation should make them ready to work in industries that exist and are likely to grow in their own states.

This reformation in career education is similar to initiatives taken in Ireland that has transformed that country from one of Western Europe's poorest to one of its fastest growing. Ireland's GDP growth rate was 4.8 percent from 1990 to 1995; 9.5 percent from 1995 to 2000; and, though the growth rate has slowed somewhat, it still is almost five times higher than the EU15 growth rate of 1.0 percent. There are several reasons for Ireland's rapid economic growth, but perhaps foremost among them was a commitment to linking the educational system and the employer community with realistic career goals for the country's young and growing workforce. Those career goals corresponded with industries that Irish authorities aimed to grow.

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The state educational system's pre-occupation with its high school graduation standards tended to lead it away from career education as a systemic organizing principle. For example, "technical" education, which excites interest in math and science by having kids work in teams to solve physical science problems, was not made a requirement in the new curriculum structure, despite pleas by the business community. Additionally, to receive formal graduation credit for a career specialty, a high school student has to pass all five Regents exams, plus a separate exam in the career specialty. So the system makes it more difficult for a kid who wants to pursue a career specialty in New York. The State Labor Department has a good web site called Career Zone that helps kids understand careers available in New York, but its connection to the curriculum structure is not nearly as strong as it should be.

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There are encouraging developments. A New York-based program called Project Lead The Way, which tries to engage students and teachers in problem-based learning to develop math and science skills, had been adopted in 126 New York high schools and 48 middle schools this past school year. And it's growing around the country. The election process has potential future leaders of the State focusing on the issue; Democratic Gubernatorial candidate Eliot Spitzer has addressed some of these issues in detail.

New York's business community has a big stake in the development of career education. And that stake is its future workforce.

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