

# Vocational ed conflict heating up

By Dan Walters

When local dignitaries and the media were invited recently to tour a new high school in Sacramento geared toward students interested in health care careers, it was touted -- with some justification -- as an example of how "career and technical education," the new-fangled name for vocational education, was gaining public and political acceptance.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, trained as a salesman as a high school student in Austria, has made revival of CTE a personal cause. "We must also continue to reinvigorate career tech education," Schwarzenegger told legislators during his State of the State address in January. "I love career tech, love it."

Schwarzenegger's crusade is underscored in a new study by the Palo Alto-based Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy. The report points out that members of the immense baby boom generation -- those born from 1946 to 1964 -- are beginning to retire from the labor force. As that trend becomes a tsunami, the state could face severe shortages of trained workers, especially skilled technicians.

Schwarzenegger's political sales job and renewed media interest have suddenly made job-oriented education politically acceptable, even trendy. Lawmakers who once touted the nonsensical notion that everyone should go to college are now pushing CTE bills, and even the college-obsessed education establishment is starting to come around.

A package of bills aimed at lowering the state's alarming high school dropout rate, introduced by Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, contains a measure his office says will "ensure that more students are challenged and prepared for both a more complex world of work and later college-level work, if they choose to pursue it." That measure, however, frames a new debate -- whether high school CTE classes should

simultaneously qualify students for college admission, or have a primarily vocational purpose.

Sacramento's new Arthur A. Benjamin Health Professions High School embodies the former concept of how CTE should be pursued -- a path advocated by such organizations as the James Irvine Foundation-supported California Center for College and Career. The high school presents itself as a prep school for medical careers that largely require additional college training, not as a vocational school into itself.

UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access, also supported by the Irvine Foundation, is promoting "multiple pathways" that will, it says, "end the tired debate" between vocational and college-prep courses by merging the two.

That sounds, at first blush, like a win-win prescription that is drawing plaudits from editorial writers and politicians such as Steinberg. But to critics, it's the same old denigration of vocational education with a glossy paint job.

"They still don't have it right," says Tom Bogetich, a retired executive director of the state Board of Education. "Sacramento's model of combining vocational education and high-level academics is designed for academically strong students who would otherwise succeed in high school."

Bogetich and other critics say that to have a real impact on dropouts, offerings must reach non-college-bound students who have technical or vocational interests.

While some vocational classes, such as those in health care, may do dual duty as college prep, others -- auto mechanics, perhaps -- may not. "Schools are failing the majority of students by assuming that they are all going to college," Bogetich says.

"Statistics haven't changed much since the 1960s. Ten enter high school, seven graduate, four go to college, and only two earn a B.A."

CTE may be trendy, but what kind of CTE is very much in flux.