

Vocational education reborn

Tailoring classes to careers

by Andrew Becker

CONCORD -- Reading, writing and 'rithmetic aren't the only Rs being taught in California high schools these days.

Rigor, relevance and relationships are the hot education buzzwords in Sacramento and a growing number of classrooms across the state as California tries to prepare today's students for tomorrow's workforce.

The thrust is to hold students to high standards while teaching subjects that prepare them for jobs or college as schools cooperate with businesses to meet their needs. It's part of larger efforts that target high school reform by blending small learning communities with meaningful classes.

For Lizette Padilla and Erika Moran, both 16-year-old juniors at Mt. Diablo High in Concord, the new Rs have made the old standards more appealing. Now in their second year in the International Hospitality and Tourism Academy, which houses from 160 to 180 students, they have gone from skipping class nearly every day to having their own academic dreams. Lizette wants to be a pediatrician and Erika aims to be a social worker. The girls say they have learned how to better interact with people while working at the school's Serendipity Restaurant.

"I know I wouldn't be going to class" if it wasn't for the small learning community, Lizette said. "The teachers keep you in check."

Erika agrees. "You know the consequences of not going to class," she said. "Teachers expect more of us."

What was once known as vocational education, a term now

shunned and replaced by the higher-minded handle of career technical education, has been reborn with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, himself a product of Austria's vocational education system, championing the change.

Educators and politicians have lined up political and financial support as they tout the renovated idea as a way to keep students in school and give them more options after graduation while benefiting California businesses.

Some fear, however, that such classes could be a return to tracking students based on race and class. And an even bigger obstacle is attracting and keeping teachers to lead updated classes when the lure of more-lucrative jobs in private industry holds sway. Meanwhile, the state already faces a projected teacher shortage of 100,000 within the next few years.

Long gone, for the most part, are the days of shop class and home economics. In the construction class at Richmond's Kennedy High, students don't just pound nails. They will soon learn computer-assisted design to help them build projects such as the nearly complete ticket booth they have worked on since January. Other offerings in East Bay high school classrooms include Ygnacio Valley's Health Science Academy, Mt. Diablo's culinary arts program and robotics at California High in San Ramon. In Antioch, a magnet school focused on medical careers will open in 2008.

For years, public education veered from vocational education, concentrating more on preparing students for college with a belief that success hinged on a degree, not

just a high school diploma. But with the demand for a skilled workforce -- and the pay that goes with it -- career tech has been recast.

An auto-shop student who earns specific certification can make \$35,000 to \$45,000 a year out of high school and possibly \$100,000 or more annually by the time it would take many former classmates to graduate from a four-year college, several educators said.

On top of classes taught through their school districts, principals are also clamoring for more class offerings through regional occupational programs. There's more demand than the county can supply, said Marie McClaskey, a director of student programs for the Contra Costa County Office of Education. The county, in turn, offers more classes than the state can pay for. McClaskey says that's a major turnaround.

"Vocational ed from our perspective had a bad rap. Kids who couldn't make it anywhere else took auto, wood and metal shop, and food classes," McClaskey said.

State Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, a former teacher, said groups including businesses, labor unions, public safety officers and correctional officers are coming together to push for career tech classes. He said he hopes that more relevant classes will motivate students and combat the 30 percent high school dropout rate statewide.

There aren't conclusive statistics to show that career technical education has a wholesale effect on graduation rates, according to a 2004 National Assessment of Vocational Education study. But research shows that the more career tech classes a student takes, the

higher earning potential the student has.

And, according to ConnectEd, a nonprofit organization funded by the James Irvine Foundation that studies and promotes career technical education, there are other signs of success. The Berkeley-based center found that in a statewide program known as California Partnership Academies, which incorporates career technical education in small learning communities, 96 percent of participating seniors graduated in the 2004-05 school year, 9 percentage points higher than the statewide figure. About 290 such academies, such as Mt. Diablo's International Hospitality and Tourism Academy, exist across the state.

"It's the right time and the right coalition to force some change in our public school focus," Torlakson said. "We've gotten out of focus in terms of practical connection to real-world jobs and making schools seem relevant."

As a result, Torlakson said, career tech programs suffered from neglect while the push for college for all California students did not succeed. At Pittsburg High, for instance, the joke was that instead of wood shop, drafting teacher Leonard Shaw taught "the theory of wood" as the once-defunct wood shop couldn't provide materials for students, he said.

"The one-size-fits-all is an approach that has not worked," said Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Sabrina Lockhart. "The governor recognizes we need workers in the career tech field as well as other professional fields. We need to ensure students have the pathway to meet those goals and keep them interested in school."

Schwarzenegger set aside \$52 million in the proposed 2007-08

budget for improvements to career tech programs and held the first-ever summit on the subject last month. Proposition 1D, the \$10.4 billion statewide education bond measure voters approved in November, allows for \$500 million to be spent to modernize career tech education across the state. Pending legislation to reform the teacher certification process is critical to attract more teachers, said Schwarzenegger's incoming secretary of education, Dave Long.

Career tech education is "getting its first decent infusion of funding in more than 20 years," Pittsburg High Principal Tim Galli said. "You're going to see this as one of the waves of the future. It's a huge need -- a skilled workforce, particularly in areas that require blending hands-on with modern technology."

But the European model the governor knows, where students must decide at 16 whether they will follow a college path or an immediate career path, has its downsides, said Joanne Durkee, director of adult and career/continuing education for Mt. Diablo schools.

"We don't want to go back in time where we track students," Durkee said.

State schools chief Jack O'Connell said career tech education isn't just a fancy way of repackaging the old tracking system. Instead, the revamped approach utilizes standards from core classes such as math and science to provide the rigor needed for students to enter the workforce or continue their studies, he said. Fewer than four years ago, fewer than 300 career tech classes met University of California or California State University requirements for admission. Today,

more than 4,700, or 20 percent of all career tech classes, qualify, O'Connell said.

That's still not enough, said Grant Cusick, who has taught auto shop at Acalanes High in Lafayette for decades. In a school where 96 percent of graduates go on to college and virtually none receives meal aid, students line up to take the class in a year-old 3,500-square-foot facility. He said he would like to see more classes qualify. As the classes are in demand at Acalanes and other schools in the East Bay, so are qualified teachers.

"You can have nice labs and real specialized areas, but finding credentialed teachers is difficult," said Mary Vinciguerra, director of curriculum and instruction for the Liberty Union High School District. "They're just not out there."

Besides the legislation being pushed to streamline the credentialing process, with the goal of attracting more teachers, including part-timers, the state is looking at how it awards credentials to prospective career tech teachers, who now need a high school diploma or GED and five years of related industry experience to be qualified. At the same time O'Connell wants to expand the California Partnership Academies and replicate their success. He is sponsoring legislation, Senate Bill 830, to expand the number from about 290 to 500 with the hope of eventually having such academies in all state high schools.

"The skills needed for career prep are really similar to college prep," he said. "Every student should have the option to attend college. I know not every student is going to go to college, and that's OK."