



The Republican.

Where students learn 21st century skills

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By **TIMOTHY P. MURRAY**

High school graduation season is a good time to look at one of the strongest success stories in our public education system. I'm referring to high schools where admission is competitive, where mastery is the standard, not just time spent in class, where community and business partnerships augment school budgets, and where students are prepared for the challenges of the global economy. This is the reality of vocational and technical education in Massachusetts today.

Consider some data. For admission this September, the Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical School in Taunton received 588 applications for 346 spots. Worcester Technical High School received 821 applications for 400 spots. Blue Hills Regional Technical School in Canton got more than 400 applications for 235 spots. Northeast Metro-Tech in Wakefield received more than 700 applications for 330 spots. Essex Agricultural and Technical High School in Danvers had 420 applications for 130 spots.

This year is not unusual, and the experience of these schools is not unique. In recent years applications to Massachusetts vocational technical schools have been roughly double the available openings. Students and their families are voting with their feet - beating a path to the vocational technical school yards.

When asked what is driving this demand, school administrators across the state offer very similar reasons. They say students and their families see that the vocational technical school model expands, rather than limits, a student's career opportunities. They see a highly structured, disciplined and safe school environment that helps students excel. Most telling is that today, many parents who are themselves vocational graduates and have done well in their professions and careers, now want their children to have the same opportunities.

This high demand for admission means students must demonstrate a competent academic record and a positive attitude to make it into a vocational technical program today. It is not the high school of last resort, as some old stereotypes may suggest. Those fortunate enough to secure a spot in these schools almost always graduate. The statewide drop-out rate for all high schools in Massachusetts is 3.8 percent, while our vocational and technical high schools have an average drop-out rate of less than 2 percent, with many schools well under 1 percent. Furthermore, more than 90 percent of students in vocational technical high schools graduate on time, well above the 81 percent statewide average for all high schools.

In other words, students want to be at these schools where they are motivated to work hard and succeed. I've seen that motivation first-hand. When I was Mayor of Worcester and chair of the city's school committee, I was directly involved in the Worcester Technical High School. As lieutenant governor, I've toured vocational technical high schools across Massachusetts. These schools are dynamic places, where students are engaged and inspired. Learning is applied, not theoretical, helping students see the relevance of their course and project work to their future success.

In April I had the pleasure of speaking at the Outstanding Vocational Technical Student Awards Ceremony at Mechanics Hall in Worcester, where 47 students from across Massachusetts were honored for their achievements. Those students are at the top of their class, but they are also reflective of their classmates.

For example, Isaiah Dyer, a carpentry student at the Putnam Vocational Technical High School in Springfield, was honored for his academic and technical excellence. In 2007 he traveled to New Orleans to help rebuild homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. As a co-op student, Isaiah worked for a local company building cabinets and has been offered a full time position upon graduation. He plans to attend Westfield State College in the fall.

Vocational education is succeeding in Massachusetts, training young people for a wide range of careers. Many go right from school to work, while half go on to a two- or four-year college program before entering the workforce.

Education experts say public schools today must teach students 21st century skills to prepare them to compete in a global economy. Beyond the basic academics, 21st century skills include the ability to work in teams, to think critically and solve problems, to use technology and to be able to communicate effectively across many media. These skills are most effectively taught through project-based learning, with clear accountability standards and opportunities for students to hone their leadership and communication skills. That is the vocational model in Massachusetts.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of public vocational education in Massachusetts. As we move into the next century, we should take stock of the good work being done at these schools, and we should expand the availability of these programs so that all qualified students have the opportunity to pursue their passion.

We must also continue to strengthen the academic components of vocational technical programs. In recent years, many of these schools have made noteworthy progress raising their MCAS scores. For the Class of 2008, 96 percent of vocational-technical students passed both the math and English portions of the MCAS - that beats the statewide average of 94 percent. Nevertheless, we must always strive to strengthen academics, and curricula should be adjusted or extended to better align the academic instruction with the rigorous expectations students will face both in college and in the workforce.

Policy makers need to take note, however, that enhancing academics must not come at the expense of student time spent developing their skills or trade. Academics are vital, but equally important is learning how to work on a team, in a real-world environment, with technology relevant to today's economy while mastering the range of skills needed to complete a complex project. That's the core of the vocational experience, and it's a lesson the vocational schools could teach some of our traditional high schools.

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