

A young man convinced his father that he could take the beloved family dog to college and teach it to talk. The father was reluctant but he loved the dog so much that he agreed to pay tuition for both the son and the dog to attend college. The son took the dog, but, of course, he pocketed the tuition money and the dog stayed in the dorm room. After four years, the father was furious when the son came home without the dog. When questioned, the son said the dog had been extremely successful and had learned to talk fluently, but the dog constantly talked about the boy's father and the close friendship the father had with the neighbor's wife. The son stated that he had become so upset with the dog's accusations that he threw the dog out of the train window. The father's emotions changed abruptly and he said, "I hope that lying, good-for-nothing dog broke his neck when you threw him from the train!"

Somewhere around the 1980s, there was a major push to send every student to a four-year college. As educators, we were conditioned to believe that a college education was the great equalizer and every child had to attend college. I still hold much of this philosophy because we need our students to further their education after high school and earn those advanced degrees; however, over the last several years I have developed a competing viewpoint that has challenged some of my earlier beliefs. It is very easy to look at the escalating cost of college tuition, the lack of jobs available for many of our liberal-arts graduates, and the enormous student loan debts amassed by students and see that there is some type of disconnect in our educational system. There is a new concept being promoted across the nation and the state of Tennessee that describes the pathway to our nation's new Middle Class, and it encourages educational institutions to better prepare students for the workforce.

Recently, I was superintendent in Virginia, where there was a concept called the 1:2:7 Balance. Workplace data indicated that 1 in every 10 jobs would require a four-year degree, approximately 2 in every 10 jobs would require a little more than a two-year degree but not a full four-year degree, and nearly 7 out of every 10 jobs would only require a two-year degree or some type of technical certification or licensure. Clearly, the data indicated that over 70% of the job vacancies would only require a two-year degree or some type of technical certification. The question posed to educational leaders was a simple one: Are we adequately preparing students for success after high school? Another question posed to us was also simple: What will happen to communities that fail to maintain this balance and don't have the workforce to attract businesses and industries?

Potential employers and industries are looking for states that can produce the *sevens* because normally the *ones* and *twos* are relatively easy to find. Some states have learned this lesson quickly and have restructured their entire K-12, community college, and four-year college systems to become more industry friendly. To illustrate this point: There were 175,000 middle-skill job vacancies (the *sevens*) in Virginia, which took about 26 days to fill. This month-long gap cost more than 36 million hours of productivity, more than \$1 billion in lost wages, and a loss of nearly \$54 million in state income taxes. It is estimated that 50-65% of the 1.5 million job vacancies over the next decade will require less than a bachelor's degree but more than a high school diploma. Middle-skill jobs account for 49% of the workforce in Virginia, but only 40% of the workers are trained for these jobs. I am confident that the numbers are very similar in the state of Tennessee. New businesses and potential employers will not consider states and localities that can't produce the *sevens* of the trained, licensed, and skilled workforce.

Middle-skill jobs are not insignificant. Many of these occupations provide honest and respectable professions. They are well-paying jobs and have excellent benefits; in fact, many pay more than some salaries of four-year college graduates. Most of our educational system and the money for academic pathways are dedicated to the *ones* and *twos*, those going to a four-year college. Very little money is allocated to the education of the *sevens*, those going into career and technical fields. The problem is further complicated because many of the scholarships, grants, and student loans are not designed to provide educational opportunities for the *sevens*, who may need it the most. We may have failed to provide the education, money, and focus for the new middle class, and our state, our citizens, our students, and our economy will suffer unless we change this paradigm.

What does all this mean for our school system? First, it is part of our responsibility to prepare students for success after high school. For some, this will be a four-year college and they will become the *ones* and *twos*. We must develop and maintain high academic standards and challenge these students with academic rigor. Make no mistake, we will continue with our rigorous Advanced Placement courses and our honors classes to challenge our most academically able students. We want to be known as a school system that will provide unequalled access to the highest academic standards in the state. Second, it is equally important that we prepare students for meaningful and productive employment. Many of these opportunities will require a *seven*-type of educational program. Third, we currently have a number of highly successful career and technical programs, but we must continue our efforts to expand and strengthen them. Fourth, we have to eliminate the antiquated beliefs and ideas about career and technical schools. Some hold the belief that our career and technical schools are places where difficult students go when they can't make it in the traditional school environment. This is not the case today. Our career and technical schools offer a number of quality programs where students can gain critical licenses and certifications that will help them gain meaningful employment after high school. Virtually all of this training is free and students can take advantage of these opportunities during the school day. Parents and students are doing themselves a great disservice by not seriously considering career and technical programming.

It is our hope that our school system will create flagship career and technical programs that will support our local industry. We will partner with local industries and help produce students who are ready for the workplace. We will work with Walters State and TCAT to increase student participation in quality technical programming. We want to ensure that all these classes are leading toward a certification or workforce credential. We want students to graduate high school and be ready for either college or the workplace.

We understand that few students truly know what they want to be at age 17, and there must be some flexibility. We can, however, introduce them to meaningful occupations and provide them with the educational opportunities to explore different options and be successful when they finally choose what they want to do. This will assist many of our students to generate a passion for specific career and technical jobs, which will in turn aid them, our local community, and the state. We encourage all parents to talk with their children about career and technical opportunities to determine if these programs would be of benefit to your families. Please consider career and technical programs as you talk with your children about the courses they will take. These conversations are extremely important. In the end, we probably can't teach even the brightest dogs

to talk, but we can prepare students for post-secondary success. Thank you for your attention to this article. Remember: School Matters!

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