

## **New York State Must Formally Embrace Career Pathways for Students**

Dan White, District Superintendent, Monroe #1 BOCES

It has been more than three and one half years since Harvard released its groundbreaking report titled “Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenges of Preparing Young Americans for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” The report highlights the growing skills gap for young adults entering the workforce, and the disconnect between our educational system and the realities of the world we are sending students into. In recognition of those dynamics, New York State undertook a number of initiatives, including a series of grants modeled after Brooklyn’s P-Tech Academy and a greater recognition of the successes in Career and Technical Education (CTE), in an effort to increase the profile and availability of career pathways programs for students. The fact is, despite those initiatives, New York State remains woefully behind many states, and much of the world, in this area.

In the face of mounting evidence that career pathways programs “...*might be the single most promising strategy for greatly increasing the percentage of young adults who earn a post-secondary degree or credential that prepares them to embark on a meaningful career*” (Pathways to Prosperity, 2011), the New York State Board of Regents is considering changing the State’s graduation requirements to reflect a number of pathway options. These options include pathways in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), humanities, the arts, and multiple pathways in CTE. The changes would include greater flexibility for students to use approved alternative exams, such as Advanced Placement (AP) tests or industry-based assessments in CTE programs, to supplant one of the required Regents Examinations New York State requires for graduation. This important discussion has once again been met with resistance. In an era where too many of our high school classrooms and programs still look like the 1950’s, one has to wonder why?

Resistance to alternative pathways to graduation is centered on the notion that career pathway programs, particularly CTE programs, are “watered down” versions of academics. More specifically, allowing pathways in these areas to count as equals to many traditional academic subjects must mean that the graduation standards will be lowered. Once again we are stuck in the 1950’s when vocational education was viewed as a track for those less academically capable. This perspective is elitist and destructive. The truth is that many AP Exams and industry-based assessments such as the SET Certification (Student Electronics Technician) or the CompTIA, which was developed by a consortium of IT corporations, are as rigorous, if not more rigorous, than many Regents Exams. These exams are gateways to not only post-secondary education, but to professional careers as well. Career pathway programs teach highly desired work-readiness skills such as attitude, teamwork and the ability to

prioritize work. More importantly, career pathway students often develop a greater understanding of traditional academic material after they have had a chance to apply the concepts in a context different than a standard classroom. Why would we as a State reject this for our students?

Traditions and folklore have their place in education. For instance, it is important for students to know about the traditions of their school and community. However, we have hung onto traditional academic practices and pursuits as the sole arbiter of success for far too long, and it has been to the detriment of our students. It is indisputable that the demands of the world and our economy have dramatically changed in the last fifty years and will continue to change at a rapid pace. As adults we must recognize the impact of this reality and make room for a diverse approach to educating our students. It is time that New York State formally embrace the rich and rigorous education that robust career pathway opportunities provide for students, and most significantly, for their future.