

THE FUTURE OF HIGH SCHOOL CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

This is the final installment of our three-part series of Richard Lynch's *New Directions for High School Career and Technical Education in the 21st century*.

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The purpose of the paper that resulted from Richard Lynch's yearlong assignment to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, is to identify and describe new directions for career and technical education in American high schools in the first decade of the 21st century. And although he says that he did not achieve his original intention of producing a single defining vision of high school career and technical education at the national level, he does provide information and research to help individual institutions and programs sharpen their own visions of the future of career and technical education.

Four Themes

In the research literature that he studied, Lynch found considerable agreement on what should be the primary directions for career and technical education, and four themes emerged.

Career Planning: There is a need to infuse career planning throughout the entire curriculum, from pre-K through lifelong learning. Career awareness should begin in early childhood and continue through about age 11, with introductions to careers and discussions with adults. Connections should be made for children between the basic subjects they are studying and their applications in the workplace. Career exploration in middle school should be more field based, action oriented and specific. It should involve examination of the relationships between careers and personal goals, education requirements and citizenship. Career exploration is the goal in high school and includes much more focused preparation for workplaces and college majors. Upon entry into high school, a career major is tentatively selected, and then is finalized by the junior year.

High School Reform: Most of those interviewed, as well as much of the literature reviewed by Richard Lynch, saw the challenge to improve high school career tech as directly connected with the challenge of improving the high schools themselves. The suggestions for high school reforms include making schools smaller, more focused, more challenging, more interesting, and more friendly and fair to all students and parents. There is also a need for more real world connections and for more resources--including more technology and well-prepared teachers.

Upgrade to a New Career and Technical Education: Currently, many prestigious colleges and universities do not favorably consider high school career tech courses in their admission requirements, and many employers Lynch interviewed did not consider high school career tech graduates adequately prepared for primary employment positions in their firms.

Therefore, not only is an improved image needed, but high school career and technical education should be more rigorous and challenging. There should be more reading, more integration of academics, more preparation in technology and more work-based learning. There should also be more collaboration with business, industry and postsecondary institutions, and more accountability.

The K-14 Model: The final theme that emerged in the research was a need for consideration of postsecondary education for all high school students, including those in career and technical education programs. School and business leaders offered two main suggestions for reforming career and technical education: tech prep and articulation between secondary and postsecondary institutions. Lynch poses a relevant policy question. Should a free public education for K-14 be extended to all students? It is his hope that local, state and federal governments will give priority to funding education through at least 13 and 14 years.

Six Components

Based on these four themes, Lynch identifies six components that should be considered at state and local levels in charting the direction of high school career tech in the next decade.

Majors: Programs, curriculum and instruction should be organized around major fields of study, similar to majors in colleges and universities.

Contextual Teaching and Learning: As discussed in the second installment of this series that appeared in the January issue of *Techniques*, more contextual teaching and learning needs to be brought into the high school curriculum.

Work-Based Learning: More substantive work-based learning will result in work-based activities that are more solidly grounded in the curriculum and will contribute to mastery of standards.

Authentic Assessment: Authentic assessment of student progress is needed to meet education standards.

Career Academies: There is a nationwide growth of career academies, and there is much evidence of the promise they hold for high school students and teachers. They are also consistent with the principles of school improvement and reform. Lynch recommends that vocational high schools and regional vocational schools consider converting their current programs to career academies. However, he cautions that this should not be a change in name only, but will have to be backed up by an appropriate career development program, a rigorous program of studies surrounding career majors and a framework for tech prep. To be successful in the 21st century, these new academies must have the characteristics of today's successful career academies.

Tech Prep: Lynch found high praise for the concept and design of tech prep from both the business and education communities. There was general agreement on its philosophy, intent and responsiveness to the objectives of education and business and industry. The problems Lynch found had to do with the implementation of the complete tech prep model that was originally envisioned by Congress as part of Perkins II. These problems include what he describes as turf wars between secondary and postsecondary institutions, inadequate resources, and a lack of commitment from many universities, school leaders and policy groups. In 1998, Congress reaffirmed its support of tech prep with Perkins III legislation that provided a separate title and increased funding. Lynch says, "Effective tech prep programs that will result in improved student achievement, increased college attendance by more high school graduates, and a *solid* career and technical education for more youths will take time and commitment to develop

from secondary and postsecondary stakeholders, considerable human and financial resources, and careful adherence to the concepts of tech prep identified by Bragg (1995) and others.”

The Future

Concepts such as career academies and tech prep will certainly play important parts in the future of high school career and technical education. And, says Richard Lynch, the “new” career and technical education—academically rigorous and career relevant—is integral to the comprehensive reform of the American high school. High school career and technical education has an important role to play in the future of our country. It is up to all of us to see that it fulfills that role in providing a 21st century education for the next generation of American high school students.

Richard Lynch is the former director of the School of Leadership and Lifelong Learning and is currently a professor of occupational studies at the University of Georgia. His paper, *New Directions for High School Career and Technical Education in the 21st Century*, can be found at www.ericacve.org/mp_lynch_01.asp