



Engaging Hands and Minds

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FOR SIX YEARS DURING THE 1990s, I taught social studies in Brooklyn, New York, at Clara Barton High School for Health Professionals, a career and technical education (CTE) school.

I remember thinking about how to approach teaching a bioethics course to seniors, including many practical nursing students. We decided that for it to be an effective, enriching, engaging learning experience, we had to make it real and delve deeply into such questions as: Is access to high-quality healthcare a fundamental right? What does that really mean, in real life? If it is a fundamental right, who pays for it?

I often watched our students' faces and body language, wondering if we had figured out the right alchemy for really engaging them. And though it may sound corny to noneducators, we teachers live for those moments when the proverbial light bulbs go on in our students' heads.

At Clara Barton High School, my students acquired practical skills that prepared them for the healthcare workplace—not simply learning how to apply those skills, but also finding joy in discovering new ways of seeing the world around them.

Today, the best CTE programs recognize that 21st-century jobs combine our minds and our hands. And for students living in poverty and at risk for dropping out, CTE can be the key to finishing school equipped with marketable skills and the choice of whether to go to college or to a job earning a living wage, or both.

Across the United States, 3 in every 4 students graduate from high school on time. For those with a CTE concentration, 9 in every 10 graduate on time, and 7 in every 10 go on to enroll in postsecondary education.

“Even though we teach aircraft maintenance, our students enter all careers because they are ready to work,” says an AFT member who is a CTE educator in New York City.

Despite the proven success of CTE programs nationwide, many are still struggling with funding or lack of support—and outdated biases that view CTE programs as vocational and meant to relegate students to second-class citizenship.

Throughout our history, the American Federation of Teachers has fought against the idea of a two-tier education system in which one class of students was groomed to be active citizens and molders of the world while a second class of students was taught to use their hands without empowering their minds.

In recent years, many educators and policymakers have come to recognize that a second-class vocational education system works for no one, particularly in our global, increasingly high-tech world. However, as school districts have been called on to rethink and retool secondary education for the careers of a rapidly changing workplace, some have simply eliminated vocational education. This is a tragic mistake.

There are multiple pathways to success in school and in life. Pathways that take an occupational or technical approach can be as rigorous as any “academic” track. In fact, the real world demands such rigor, and the evidence is clear that students respond to it.

Even in this time of tremendous gridlock in Washington, D.C., there is a ray of hope when it comes to CTE and workforce development. Congress recently passed the bipartisan Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which will significantly reform our workforce development and job training system for the first time in many years. And the Obama administration, under the direction of Vice President Joe Biden, recently released the *Ready to Work* report, which outlines what the administration is doing to revamp federally funded training programs.

However, as CTE educators across the country can attest, more needs to be done.

“Employers expect our students to know how to use different kinds of hardware and software that we just can’t afford to buy,” says one AFT member in Florida.

Congress must act now to reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act with full funding. Last reauthorized in 2006, this crucial piece of legislation should remain a formula grant designed to provide funding to the districts and schools that need it most.



Randi Weingarten visits teachers and students at A.I. Prince Technical High School in Hartford, Connecticut.

All these initiatives must be aligned so that secondary and postsecondary programs both coordinate and communicate. In addition, teachers, administrators, unions, businesses, and community organizations must be able to collaborate to give students access to high-quality CTE programs as well as internships and mentoring opportunities—and to ensure that CTE educators get the training, flexibility, and support they need.

We need more programs like the National Industry Certification for Educators initiative, recently launched by the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, which gives educators access to software, online resources, and curricula so they can deliver high-quality instruction using cutting-edge technology.

Together, we will ensure that high-quality CTE becomes the vital part of our American educational system that it can and must be.