



College not the only way to win

It's the closest thing Sacramento's seen to a détente in recent memory: Business, labor and education leaders publicly aligned on an important issue. What's more, Republican, Democrats, legislators and the governor are all excited by the opportunity ahead. The issue around which there's been such a unified interest is the promotion and re-institution of career technical education--otherwise called vocational training--back into public schools. The effort is not an attempt to limit what students can explore, but rather will expand educational choices to offer students the opportunities they deserve in an environment of dignity and respect. The resulting coalition is dubbed "Get R.E.A.L." or Relevance in Education and Learning, and the renewed focus on public-education priorities couldn't come at a more critical time for California.

The California Employment Development Department expects 6.5 million new job openings to be generated in this state by 2014. The large number of jobs created by economic growth (2.5 million) and through baby-boomer retirements (4 million replacement jobs) provides vast opportunities for both young entry-level job seekers and highly-skilled, technology-savvy workers. A 2006 report from the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy concluded: "It is not true that most jobs will require a four-year degree. The new emphasis on career technical education will be helpful in converting California's workforce challenges into opportunities."

While all students must master basic academic principles to succeed as an adult, our youth must also be prepared to succeed in technical training after high school, because that's where the vast majority of new middle-class jobs will be. The average industrial technician, for example, earned \$54,643 in 2006, according to the California Employment Department, while all other full-time U.S. workers earned a median income of less than \$34,000. And for every one biotech engineer, up to seven lab technicians are needed for support. This growing number of

tech and skilled labor jobs will sustain California's middle class Get REAL, a coalition including the State Building and Construction Trades Council and the California Manufacturers & Technology Association, was formed to prepare students to take advantage of these workforce demands. The Coalition's mission is to expand the educational choices for students and change the stereotypes associated with skilled vocational coursework within academia, the media and the political arena.



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Get REAL wants to work with state leaders to turn this pending job crisis into an opportunity. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who campaigned aggressively for the successful 2006 education bonds that included funds for additional CTE classrooms, is a proud product of vocational training. At the age of 15, he was trained in marketing and used that vocation until bodybuilding brought him to America and Hollywood. He continues to use those vocational skills today. In Europe, the governor explained, a skilled machinist is honored for his art form. Regrettably, the same is not always true in the United States. The result has been California's disconnect between academic priorities and economic opportunities.

California's education system has been geared to prepare all students for the same future, while failing to embrace the evolution in our economy. Only one in four high school students go on to earn baccalaureate degrees. An excessive emphasis on college prep leaves most high school students without proper skills to apply for jobs within the fastest growing sectors in the California economy. In fact, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections show less than a 1 percent increase in the proportion of jobs in the national economy requiring a baccalaureate degree or higher in the next six years.

One sad result of our state's departure from vocational training has been an increase in the high-school dropout rate, currently at an astounding 30 percent. And estimated graduation rates for minority students are substantially lower.

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Students are increasingly turning their back on school because high school fails to provide them with opportunities to connect their instruction with actual career goals and life aspirations. According to a recent Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation study on high school dropouts, 81 percent of dropouts questioned called for more “real-world” learning opportunities. Somewhat surprisingly, 88 percent had passing grades when they dropped-out, and 70 percent said they could have graduated had they tried.

The Get REAL coalition announced earlier this month a comprehensive policy agenda that will put California schools back on track and get kids re-engaged. Last week, state Senator Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, a member of the Senate Education Committee and Appropriations Committee chair, introduced Get REAL’s keystone legislation. The bill, SB 672, which passed out of the Senate Education

Committee on a 6-2 vote, would adjust high-school graduation requirements to meet the needs of the 21st century economy by requiring that all students receive some level of career and technical coursework. The policy change will provide students with technical knowledge and skills in one or more of the 15 industry sectors of our state’s economy and will provide them with the career planning they need to succeed.

On the other side of the Capitol, in the Assembly Education Committee, another Get REAL bill, Assemblywoman Loni Hancock’s AB 1414, passed with an 8-0 vote. This bill would dedicate an anticipated increase in Prop 98 funds to support standards-aligned CTE programs and the hiring of qualified CTE instructors. Both bills now move to the Senate and

Assembly Appropriations Committees. This economic evolution is one of the greatest challenges facing Sacramento. Thankfully, leaders are beginning to see that if we unite now we can turn this imminent workforce crisis into a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fill jobs, grow the economy and attract talented kids back to school with a meaningful education.

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