**“Vocational High Schools: Career Path or Kiss of Death?”**

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Education professionals are split on whether vocational training in high school helps or hurts students.

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When William Fuller graduates this spring, he'll be leaving with more than just a high school diploma. He'll also have a carpentry certification and a full-time job offer from his current employer, a custom cabinetmaker in Lester, Pennsylvania.

That's because Fuller is graduating from Philadelphia's Mercy Vocational High School, which aims to ensure that students leave not only with the basics they need to earn a high school diploma in the state, but also an industry certification.

Working while he was younger with his uncle, who was a construction worker, sparked Fuller's interest in carpentry.

"I always liked taking apart things and putting them back together," Fuller says. That's why the career-training programs at Mercy were appealing to him. "It shows you how the world is, and what to expect when you're going to be going out there to work."

High schools like Mercy – known as career and technical schools or vocational schools – are increasing their presence throughout the country, at a time when support for career and technical education is picking up steam as an alternative route to the middle class. There are roughly 90 career and technology schools and centers in Pennsylvania, at least 70 vocational high schools each in Ohio and Massachusetts, and similar numbers in other states.

Vocational education historically has been prevalent in European countries, such as Finland and Germany, but often comes with a stigma in the U.S. that suggests only low-performing and troublemaking students end up in such schools. In Germany, children of middle school age take tests and either move on to apprenticeships or a university preparation route, says James Stone III, director of the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education at the University of Louisville.

"We look at that and say, 'Oh, isn't that terrible?' Because we’re condemning kids based on a test at that age," Stone says. "But when you actually look at what they do and how they do it, the system works extraordinarily well. They have one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in the industrialized world, and going through an apprenticeship in no way prevents one from moving on to college."

While the rhetoric of the last few years has centered around encouraging every young person in America to go to college as a way to find gainful employment and a guaranteed route to the middle class, some are increasing their calls for multiple pathways to those outcomes.

Even President Barack Obama has called for [more robust job training](https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/04/07/obama-biden-push-for-more-robust-job-training-in-high-school-college) at both the high school and college levels, saying it's not enough for students to get an education past high school – they also must have the skills needed for in-demand jobs. The president in April announced more than $100 million in awards to redesign high schools to better prepare students for college or specific career industries, such as health care, technology and engineering.

Not every student is suited to go to college, and not every student necessarily wants to go, some education advocates say.

"We've done a disservice in this country by suggesting that there's only one path to success, which is to get a bachelor's degree," says Mark Edwards, executive director of Opportunity Nation, a campaign to increase economic opportunity in America. "There are many good-paying jobs available today that, quite candidly, a four-year bachelor of arts degree does not prepare them for."

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that by 2020, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require some sort of postsecondary education or training beyond a high school diploma. But how and where that training takes place – whether in a college classroom or an auto shop – can be quite varied, Edwards says.

"We need to expand how we think about success," he says. "It's just a smarter, more nuanced way of thinking about workforce development."

At the David H. Ponitz Career Technology Center in Dayton, Ohio, students can choose between 14 different career pathways such as cosmetology, culinary arts, banking and finance, dental assisting, automotive technology and digital design. In each program, they have the opportunity to earn an industry certification, Principal Ray Caruthers says.

"This model is very much the model that needs to go across the country, because all students are not of the mindset that they want to go to a four-year college," Caruthers says. "This gets the options out early, and those students can get right into the field … and become contributors to society."

Vocational high schools, Caruthers says, are effective in preparing students for success because they provide a hands-on and engaging environment for learning. In 2013, at least three-quarters of the school's 11th-grade students scored as proficient in reading, writing, mathematics and social studies on the state graduation test – higher in every category than the district average, according to the school's report card.

"Families sometimes that have been hit with stories that are not successful are looking for some evidence whereby their students can live out some sort of dream the family has had, or that a student has a personal aspiration to become," Caruthers says. "Here, that dream can start to become a reality."

Caruthers says many of his school's graduates still continue their education – whether at a two-year community college or a four-year university – but have the flexibility of added income should they need or choose to work part-time. It's not about discouraging students from going to college, he says, but making sure they have options should they choose to pursue another path.

Ponitz senior Da'Qeayce Swain, who is studying in the school's radio and television pathway, says he plans to study mass communications and education at Baldwin Wallace University in Berea, Ohio. Swain says he wanted to go to the technology center specifically because he thought learning a certain trade would benefit him in college. The major difference between a vocational high school and a traditional high school, he says, is the experience students have with teachers.

"In career tech, you have teachers who were in that industry and can give you the insight into what you can look forward to in your future industry," Swain says.

Shemari Hale, a senior at Ponitz, says while she plans to study pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Toledo next fall, studying cosmetology in high school – and becoming certified – will allow her to work flexible hours while in school.

"You're not just leaving with a diploma, but a diploma and a license and certification," Hale says. "The most fun thing is being able to be hands-on and not just being taught from a book."

Because Ponitz is a public high school in Ohio, students still have a full, core curriculum. After taking a career-exploration course in the ninth grade, they choose a pathway that begins their sophomore year.

But having students make such an early career choice is why the expansion of vocational high schools is concerning to some, says Carol Burris, principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre, New York, and a noted expert on equity in education.

"The big fear I have is that we are going to go back to where we were at the beginning of the last century, where we start sorting and selecting students, and putting them on life paths that may foreclose their options," Burris says, arguing that big decisions about separating students based on test scores – whether academic or career-oriented – should not happen before the age of 16.

"Why are we saying that we have the right to start to put our kids on career paths when they haven't experienced that much of the world?" Burris says.

There's also an important distinction between preparing students for "college and career" and preparing them for "college or career." Burris, who identifies as being of the former mindset, says the skills needed to excel in college are not so different from the skills needed for a true career.

Catherine Glatts, vice principal for technology and career and technical education at Mercy Vocational, disagrees. Before joining the private school, which serves a largely low-income and at-risk student population, she worked as a systems engineer for defense contractor Lockheed Martin, where she also hired recent college graduates.

She says she was particularly amazed at how the younger generation was dressing: Many would come to work in jeans, hoodies and baseball hats.

"They understood their technical skills, if they [earned an] engineering degree, they did that well. But the skills they don’t always get in college … are on the people side," Glatts says. "We work very hard … with making sure we develop a well-rounded – they look you in the eye, they shake your hand, they engage with you – kind of student."

Glatts says it's always a challenge asking a teenager what he or she wants to do for a potential career, but graduating with a skill they can use to earn income is an advantage. That flexibility also is helpful for students who aren't sure if they want to immediately go to college: Glatts says she promotes "the nontraditional path to college," wherein if students don't go, they still have a ticket to an occupation through which they can support themselves and become more marketable to future employers.

For example, cosmetologists earn $27,540 annually on average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. An electrician – another option for Mercy students – can  earn more than $53,500 each year.

Mercy also has a program through which seniors who have completed a certain amount of their career-training requirements can spend afternoons working in their field. Currently, more than half of the senior class is taking advantage of this option, Glatts says.

Erica Zabala is one of those students. Not yet out of high school, she is already a certified nursing assistant and spends her afternoons working at St. Ignatius Nursing Home in Philadelphia. Although she plans to continue her education and pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing from La Salle University in the same city, Zabala says having a vocational education will give her a leg up in college.

"Ever since I was young, I knew I wanted to do something in the nursing field because I was so used to helping my grandmother when she was sick," Zabala says. "But I want to build up my career. I don't want to just stay as a nurse's aide."

At Mercy, Glatts says about 60 percent of graduating seniors had full-time job offers last year, but many chose to continue their education. Overall, 38 percent of the class of 2013 continued to postsecondary education – including colleges, trade schools and training programs – and another 35 percent worked while also continuing their education. Twenty-six percent entered full-time employment.

Still, proponents of vocational education say there's a balance that needs to be maintained between expanding opportunities for students and inadvertently pushing them down one road or another, which Burris says simply creates "fodder for business."

"More and more, as businesses get involved, that's what they want, and that's exactly the same kind of thinking that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century," Burris says. "I feel as though we're just reliving all of that again, in a smoother package, but it's still that same kind of philosophy.

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