

High School Reform, Including School-to-Career Programs

For too many students, our high schools are not working. Many drop out. Others stick out it out for the diploma, but feel that they are just marking time. Too many emerge without the high-level academic skills we say all should have and without adequate preparation for further education and successful careers. This is the unfortunate but natural product of a century old high school system based on the premise that only some students can learn to high standards.

Vocational education in particular has long been criticized for channeling some students - particularly low-income and minority students -- away from academic achievement in return for a promise of specific technical skills that too often are rendered obsolete by rapid changes in labor markets, job requirements, and youths' career goals. Moreover, in low-income communities, the problem is not just inadequate skills but insufficient jobs that use those skills. On the other hand, if infused with high academic content, vocational education and school-to-career programs have a great deal to offer schools. Teaching methods traditionally used in vocational education -- active learning, students' demonstration of skills through a project, and coaching relationships, for example -- are at the heart of what we now know, from educational research, is good academic instruction for students.

The Vocational Opportunity for Community and Educational Development (VOCED) Project works to improve high schools so that all students can reach high standards. While linked to CLE's other school reform work, such as Title I, the project also puts a particular emphasis on reform of vocational education and school-to-career programs. We have worked since the early 1980s to improve promote the following principles.

Quality. Programs should develop the use of high-level academic and problem-solving skills in authentic settings for all students, including the same academic skills expected for all students and the prerequisites to ensure they are not cut off from the option to go to four-year colleges. Instead of just training students with the skills needed to carry out one narrowly defined job, vocational programs should provide students with strong understanding of and experience in all aspects of an industry. This includes planning, management, finance, labor, principles of technology, technical and production skills, community issues, and health, safety, and environment as it affects that industry. Programs should enable students to contribute to the development of their communities by exploring community resources and needs and getting involved in projects and enterprises which help make significant contributions to meeting those needs.

Equity. Every student should be provided with equal access to all components of high-quality programs, with a full range of supplementary services and modifications he or she needs to succeed in the most integrated setting possible.

Participatory Governance. Students, parents, teachers, and community members should participate fully in all significant aspects of planning, implementing, and program assessment.

The VOCED Project has worked to ensure that federal vocational policy - including the 1990 Perkins Act and the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act - embraces these principles and promotes serious, schoolwide academic reform. The Project also assists those in the field -- including advocates, schools and education agencies, and parents -- in reforming programs and implementing these principles. In addition to publications, training, and other assistance, this includes intensive help to some localities, where VOCED project site schools from Oakland to Chicago to Cambridge have been recognized as leaders in vocational reform, where students emerge not only better prepared for careers in a changing economy that demands flexibility and entrepreneurial spirit, they continue their formal education at a higher rate than graduates of the traditional academic track.

The VOCED Project works closely with the Big Picture on two related initiatives -- the Hands and Minds Collaborative, made up of educators and others working to implement these principles in high schools; and the New Urban High School initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education to link key principles of school-to-career reform with broader high-school restructuring efforts. (See Areas of Assistance for more information on this collaboration.)