

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

# College Prep Is Career Prep

By **Heath E. Morrison**

Do we want students to graduate ready for college or ready for careers? In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, our answer is yes—because we see no difference between being ready for college and ready for a career. Instead, we believe we have an imperative to graduate all students with a skill set that prepares them for economic independence and their next step in life, wherever and however they choose to pursue it. Our experience has been that focusing students on goals, rather than segregating them by what those goals are, is the pathway to success.

Employers want high school graduates who can think mathematically, communicate, create, work in teams, and solve problems in an entrepreneurial environment. Colleges and universities continue to seek high school graduates who are academically prepared (in a range of subjects, including math) and can communicate, create, and think critically.

We believe there is no substantial difference here. The skills needed to succeed in the military, a trade school, or the workforce are the same skills needed to succeed at an institution of higher learning.

Every student in our North Carolina district is entitled to the same strong academic preparation throughout the continuum from prekindergarten through 12th grade. We know what elementary school students need to be ready for middle school. We know what middle school students need to be ready for high school. Why does education persist in the artificial divide between college and career for high school students? To best serve our students, we should observe a high academic standard for all high school graduates.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, we use a mix of academic programs and community partnerships to prepare our students. We use traditional measures, such as participation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. We also offer dual-enrollment programs, such as middle and early colleges, which allow high school students to directly experience college classrooms and earn transferable college credits.

Our experience with career and technical education suggests all students benefit from rigorous preparation no matter what their postsecondary plans are. Higher graduation rates and high postsecondary-persistence rates have led us to expand our CTE academy program and our five small, career-focused high schools,

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which today enroll an average of 450 to 500 students each. These programs link high academic expectations and career-aspiration relevance. They develop 21st-century skills through strong co-curricular programs, such as career and technical student organizations.

In 2013, our 2,882 CTE students had a cohort graduation rate of 92.4 percent, well ahead of the district's overall rate of 81 percent. The 460 seniors in our JROTC program, which prepares them for the military, had a 2013 graduation rate of 98.6 percent.

Our dual-enrollment programs for juniors and seniors have even higher graduation rates—so much so that we're placing a big bet on them, expanding from one campus to five in three years. Cato Middle College, our first, allowed students to take a full load of college courses at Central Piedmont Community College while finishing high school—and Cato's graduation rate for the past three years has been 100 percent. (The size of the graduating classes at Cato ranged from 55 students in 2010-11 to 99 graduates in 2012-13.)

We have expanded our collaboration with Central Piedmont, and placement of a school on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is in the works.

Why are our CTE, JROTC, and middle-college programs so successful at preparing our students for a career, the military, or college? We believe the answer is engagement. The students in these programs, as well as those who participate in internships during school, have found something that engages them. Engaged students are successful.

The story of India Gregory, a Charlotte-Mecklenburg graduate who attended a small high school focused on science, technology, engineering, and math, is an instructive one.

India, now a sophomore at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (also known as North Carolina A&T), was by her own account not very interested in school. Especially not in math—she barely passed state math assessments in elementary and middle school. But all that changed when she was introduced to work-based learning in high school, along with project-based study. She began building robots and Habitat for Humanity houses in high school, and she got hooked on math. She completed Calculus 2 and had internships at Siemens and Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories in her last two years of high school. Now, as a sophomore at North Carolina A&T, she has lined up her next step: She has accepted a job offer from Boeing, which will start when she finishes college. (You can see India's **TED talk** in Charlotte here.)

There are many students like India—students who start out drifting and then find something in high school that becomes a passion strong enough to carry them to college and beyond. What can they tell us about shaping public education? We think they are telling us that engagement is the key: It's about finding something students care about and following where it leads.

## Students

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—Robbie Lawrence for Education Week

**"Why does education persist in the artificial divide between college and career for high school students?"**

Academic choice, such as the small high school India Gregory attended, is one way to engage students. Real-life learning experiences, including the kind of internships India had, can also engage students.

In our district, we want every school to be a school of choice—a school for the future, not the school we fondly remember from the past. In this context, great teaching, great classes, and great opportunities can all come together.

Our focus is on customizing the learning experience for every student, using personalized plans of progress. We want students to become champions of their own learning. We are working directly with partners in the corporate world, such as Siemens, Schweitzer, and others, as well as with our counterparts in higher education, so that we can prepare our students for the future. The jobs they will hold do not exist yet, but if we can prepare them with the right mix of 21st-century skills, our students will be ready to succeed.

Whatever our students choose—whether it's college, career, the military, or a mix of those things—the engagement has to come first. That's why we've made increased academic choice and greater personalization the focus of our districtwide strategic plan. We want every student to be engaged, and we know that it's not a one-size-fits-all proposition.

Our district is a rich, diverse mosaic of 144,000 students with 144,000 different dreams. We believe we can prepare all of them for life after high school, and that process begins with engaging them in learning.

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*Heath E. Morrison is the superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the second-largest public school district in North Carolina.*

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