

Cross-posted at *Education Week*.

Terry Holliday, the recently retired chief state school officer in Kentucky, has written a short piece for the Association for Career & Technical Education on what it means to be “work ready” that is rather interesting. He’s been reading the state plans submitted to the United States Department of Education and analyzing what they say about the standards they have in place for determining the degree to which their students are graduating from school ready for work.

Holliday begins by pointing out that the high school diploma is worthless as a measure of either college readiness or work readiness. Because that is so, the use of graduation rates as an accountability measure has opened, he says, an “honesty gap” that he thinks his former colleague chief state school officers are aware of and want to correct.

During the George W. Bush era, state accountability systems only very rarely had any measure of work readiness separate from their measures of college readiness. But, he observes, that is changing.

“Most states are now using a “menu” model for state accountability,” Holliday writes. “Schools will be held accountable based on the percentage of students who choose among menu options. The menu of college and career indicators usually includes student performance on Advanced Placement, dual credit courses, International Baccalaureate exams, WorkKeys, SAT, ACT, Accuplacer, completion of a CTE course of study, ASVAB, and industry-recognized certifications.”

Many of these measures are clearly intended to measure readiness for work, not college. And Holliday worries, with good reason, that some, perhaps most, will be regarded as embodying an inferior standard in the minds of students, parents, teachers and employers—signifying a second-class status for career and technical education.

When I read this I was instantly reminded of the long-running battle in England on this very front, with well-intentioned advocates of career and technical education trying to establish standards for it that would have what the British call “parity of esteem” with high academic standards. In current American parlance: Good luck with that! Though one British commission after another has advocated one or another plan that was supposed to bring about that divine state, it has happened repeatedly on paper and never in practice.

But, I mused to myself, that is not the case in, say, Switzerland. Why not? Well, actually, the list of measures on the menu of work readiness that Holliday gives us is at least a



the list of measures on the menu of work readiness that HOLLIDAY gives us is at least a part of the answer. Students who have at least three or four Advanced Placement courses under their belt with a score of 3 or higher, good grades and good SAT scores, or those who have earned the International Baccalaureate diploma, will have no trouble getting into college and a shot of getting into an upper-tier selective college. But, in most American states, completing a Career and Technical Education course of study means only passing three CTE courses in a sequence, which does not attest to mastery of anything. Accuplacer, for those who do not know, is a placement test, used by open admissions colleges to determine whether a high school graduate has the skills needed to be placed in credit-bearing courses. Given the cutoff scores usually used on these tests (states can set their own and often set them lower than the College Board suggestion), they are really measuring whether the students have mastered a middle school curriculum, not a high school curriculum. An industry-recognized certification can cover some really demanding occupations but others involve very modest skills. If these are the measures under consideration, parity of esteem is out of the question.

Apart from the traditional highly unionized skilled trades, the United States has what economists call a two-tier labor market. Employers paying high wages rarely hire anyone for jobs on a career track directly from high school, because they think that a high school diploma means almost nothing and they have no way of knowing what the individual really knows and can do. So they hire from the pool of people who have been in the labor market for a few years, because there is a track record to look at. So young people looking for work right out of high school have to see what they can find in the secondary labor market, made up of jobs in small firms that don't have the luxury of waiting but which typically don't offer either the wages or the career paths that the big employers do. These are the firms that hire based on the high school diploma and hope for the best. These firms may or may not be interested in whether a young graduate has passed a community college placement test or has taken three courses in a career and technical education field, because they will know that this is a very low bar indeed.

Contrast this, if you will, with Switzerland. In the United States, career and technical education is widely viewed as what you do if you cannot do academics. That is not true in Switzerland. Heads of giant firms in Switzerland have come up through the vocational education route, something that is almost unheard of in the United States. Seventy percent of the high school student body in Switzerland is made up of vocational education students. Many of them are headed for one of Switzerland's Applied Science Universities, which are postsecondary vocational education institutions. These are not second-class institutions. Why? Principally because the high school students coming into them are very strong academically, so they can offer high quality technical training



into them are very strong academically, so they can offer high-quality technical training that is academically demanding. And that is the key to the whole design. In Switzerland, Singapore and other nations with strong systems of career and technical education, the academic standards are very high for all high school students. Vocational education is not what you do if you are not good at academics; it is what you do if you want an applied education that requires strong academics.

Terry Holliday is right in thinking that the United States is using its accountability system to concoct a set of standards for career and technical education that will reinforce rather than break down the low standing of career and technical education in the United States. The underlying problem is not the standards per se, it is the fact that the academic performance of so many of the students going into vocational education is so low. When it is high, employers will not have to wait a few years to find out whether high school graduates are up to the work they need to have done. They will know that the program that prepared them for the kind of work on offer was developed on the assumption that the students enrolled in the career and technical education programs they run are capable of applied work that demands a high level of knowledge and skill in mathematics, science and English literacy.

Parity of esteem does not depend on jiggering the laws and regulations, as they tried to do in England. It depends on parity of real accomplishment.

When and if the United States gets that right, it will have to cope with another characteristic of the list of measures many states are now using for accountability: the fact that it is a hodgepodge of measures which, for the most part, were never intended to be used this way. As I have said so many times in this space, the states need to set a standard for high school leavers that actually means something, in particular that the student has the kind of academic skills that Swiss students are expected to have when they leave high school, whether they intend to join the workforce right away or go on for more education.

Once we have done that, we might consider creating something else the Swiss have: an actual system of occupational skill standards covering most entry-level jobs in the country. We tried that once before and botched the job. Maybe it is time we tried again.



Tags: college and career readiness, vocational education, workforce

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