



VOCATIONAL EDUCATION NEEDS A NEW NAME & A NEW GAME: Education For Economic Survival

Position Paper IV

Let's face it, college is not for everybody, either by choice or necessity. So, when a distinguished group of civil rights lawyers complained last year of the withered state of vocational education in our public schools, they overlooked the irony that in large part it was the very promotion of civil rights which had led to *voc ed*'s sudden demise. Lest we forget, back in the bad old days before the street activist, Julius Hobson, ended it in court, there had been a "pattern and practice" in the DC Public Schools to "track" black students to manual training, home economics, and clerical vocations, while whites were steered to preparation for college.

The resulting resentment led to discarding the baby (vocational education) with the bath water of segregated tracking, when Congress gave DC an elected school board as an experiment in home rule.

The unintended consequence has been the closure of all schools previously dedicated to vocational training and the span of such courses becoming narrowed citywide to less than those previously available in a single high school fifty years ago. While there are vague plans to the contrary, McKinley High is the only high school up and running with a clear technical training bias, and even there this is strictly devoted to the white collar end of information technology and telecommunications.

Gone is the building trades and skilled crafts preparation once considered lowly blue collar livelihoods that have since escalated to middle class salary ranges. As a result DC students are shut out of the 20 billion dollars of dynamic growth in construction jobs in the booming housing and office expansion which is the pride of our local economy. And they are equally ill prepared for the technical and supervisory opportunities which follow.

Aiding and abetting this vocational training decline has been the chaotic assortment of overlapping and conflicting public agencies bumping heads in job training. These include the State Education Office, City Council's Special Committee on Vocational Education and Jobs, the University of the District of Columbia, the Department of Employment Services, the Workforce Investment Council and the DC Office of Personnel. Each has its niche mission overlapping with others in the mix and each has its roster of inward looking publications, program goals and priorities, as well as self-serving rhetoric about their "successes."

But guess what? While the District has created 34,000 new jobs, District residents have lost 14,000 in the same ten years. So much for the bottom line output of our multimillion dollar jobs training investment, better tagged a "boondoggle."

Granted that on paper DCPS has presented very ambitious and well articulated new plans for renewing its vocational programs (called Gateways to DC's Future), but in the absence of practical moorings to and in the commercial private sector, they are little better than pipe dreams destined for the trash bin like their ill-fated predecessors.

We need a halt in this fragmentation, duplication and waste and the President of the DCPS Board of Education should assume the citywide lead in drawing DC business leaders and construction companies into a New Economy Collaborative to redesign Education For Economic Survival consistent with market realities. Job

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A Copy of our report is filed with the Director of Campaign Finance District of Columbia Board of Elections.

growth projections must be linked to curricula. Teachers should be loaned, recruited, or trained-up to workplace standards. State of art equipment and facilities need to be provided both on and off site for schools or a community college, as well as on the job training provided in the latest techniques and machinery are required for state-of-art preparation. Pre-employment hiring commitments must be negotiated as an incentive for successful training completion. And follow-up record keeping must be implemented for outcome documentation, rather than mere hearsay public relations.

All of this is both doable and necessary to make vocational and technical training real. This presupposes a parallel academic program in language, math, social studies at functional levels required for workforce performance and civic participation consistent with national standards.

Instead of each program standing alone based on bureaucratic budgets and sponsorship, all programs must relate to the overall enterprise of creating and sustaining viable employment, job growth and security. This will include retooling of workers as jobs change and performance demands grow. This will require more than lip service interface between DCPS and UDC. Workers should be encouraged to pursue learning seamlessly from high school through college as their aptitudes and competencies grow. The denim and silk in education must be brought together.

In every aspect of this effort, attention is required to the New Economy shift from routine service and office work to creative knowledge employment and entrepreneurship. This will require a system of retraining for teachers to the new workplace realities and the supplementing of their ranks with loaned personnel from the private sector. Of the many models available, the most successful have been those in which the private sector's motive is self-interest rather than short lived charity or mere public relations. Therefore a functional partnership is required, rather than *window-dressing* and *photo ops*.

The design and pursuit of such a program requires a practical working knowledge of business and the New Economy in the presidency of the Board of Education. And it is just such experience that has filled my entire professional career as a management consultant with both public and private expertise. I know the economic requirements of cost effective training and the efficiencies of a well run educational program using private sector partners, volunteers, and donors. This is a course for DCPS to follow for the economic survival of a diverse population. This is the goal I seek to lead toward—a new name and new game called **Education for Economic Survival**.

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