

# Career and technical education is new model for 21st century

**By Steve Otter**  
San Juan BOCES

Career and technical education (CTE) is at the forefront of improving student achievement by supporting academic skills that are taught with relevance to the real world. Students in CTE programs not only learn math, science and language arts, but they also learn why learning is important as they apply their newly acquired skills in a real-world context and plan for their own careers. Students in 21st century CTE programs apply that learning to agribusiness, rural entrepreneurship, process technology, biotechnology and other fast-growing and rewarding areas. Where our old vocational model targeted students who were not "college material," our new CTE models target all students, from those who want to go to work immediately to those who want to pursue graduate degrees. While vocational schools were designed to teach students to go directly to the work force after high school, our CTE programs are designed to teach both academics and technical skills to students who will have the choice about whether to go directly into the work force or to continue their education. Where our old model may have limited students with a certificate for hourly employment in a few specified fields, our new model prepares them with numerous entry and exit points along a pathway for work and education.

CTE must be built on a logical and seamless pathway from high school to postsecondary education that provides ways for students to plan for highly skilled, high-paying careers in a variety of interest areas. In our schools, we are engaging in the implementation of multiple career pathways that will end the age-old debate about whether students need more rigorous academics or a more relevant career-focused vocational curriculum.

Instead, multiple pathways offer students and their families options among a variety of high school programs that provide both the academic and the career foundations students need for advanced learning, training and responsible citizenship. These choices are based on student interests as well as the unique strengths and opportunities in our community.

Strong partnerships between the schools and postsecondary education institutions such as Fort Lewis College and the proposed Southwest Colorado Community College Campus (the merger of Pueblo Community College and San Juan Basin Technical College) provide the next step for our students on their journey to a successful career. Lastly, we must connect with our industries, because ultimately CTE links what happens in our schools with what happens in our workplaces and communities, benefiting employers and local and regional economies.

The nine school districts in the Four Corners as well as the San Juan and Southwest BOCES have joined forces to create a regional service area that will align secondary and postsecondary programs to keep kids in school and actively engaged in learning. The service area will partner with regional business groups and economic development leaders to help develop strategies for ensuring that CTE programs important to the region have access to the latest technologies, expertise, job shadowing and internships for students. You will hear more about the service area in the coming months as the governance council becomes operational. The regional service area will truly be a community collaborative to support the successful learning outcomes of youths.

Why is this important? The state of Colorado alone will need 238,000 replacement jobs during the next five years, which equates to 48,000 jobs per year. We know that 80 percent of those jobs (38,080) will require a certificate or a two-year degree. In 2007, Colorado produced 12,800 students with those necessary credentials. As you can see, we need more students on a path to success.

What can you do? Get involved in one of our school's dynamic and successful CTE programs by serving on an advisory board and use your experience and knowledge of industry to guide learning. Look at opportunities to mentor a student or open your business to internships. Spend some time learning about the incredible effect CTE programs have on issues that concern us all, like graduation rates and student success.

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