

With expanded technical education offerings, the Port-Saukville School District is putting a 21st century spin on the concept of a comprehensive high school

The concept of a comprehensive high school education that prepares students for diverse roles in society, once the norm in America, has fallen out of favor in some school districts. Secondary schools in these places, usually economically upscale areas, have shaped curriculums to exclusively serve the needs of students bound for college.

Residents of the Port Washington-Saukville School District can be thankful that their high school never abandoned the comprehensive model, for it is now poised to take vocational education on a leap forward to prepare some of its students for jobs in a high-tech world.

Plans call for Port High to expand its technology education department with an additional teacher and new courses, but that understates the importance of what's going on. A better indicator is this: Some of the courses will be part of a biomedical engineering program; high school vocational classes will introduce to students to the science of combining engineering principles with biology and medicine to advance health care. In other words, not your grandfather's shop classes.

The Port High program is a response to need. Even with millions of people looking for jobs, many employers can't fill positions because applicants don't have the requisite skills. College educations aren't the answer. A paper published by Harvard University projects that only a third of the 47 million jobs expected to be created by 2018 will require a bachelor's degree.

This is not news to employers, which is why local businesses are expected to step up to help pay for the technical education initiative. The district is hoping that the purchase of \$161,000 in equipment for the program will be financed by industries.

The prospects of that happening are excellent, judging from the success of Project Lead the Way. That program, in place for four years at Thomas Jefferson Middle School and started at the high school a year later, is aimed at preparing students for careers in engineering, math and science and is supported by area businesses. Students have responded to it in such numbers that demand for the elective classes cannot be met.

The goals of expanded technical education start with getting students interested in studies that serve the advance of technology and then to prepare some for jobs right out of high school and others for further education in technical schools or colleges.

The incentives for students are the careers available in technical fields that are expected to provide solid middle class earnings. As those opportunities proliferate, the importance of the new iteration of high school vocational education will only increase.

Port High's leap to high-tech

Written by Ozaukee Press

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There is a caveat, however: A four-year college education remains a significant marker of achievement in the United States. The liberal educations provided at universities and colleges impart broad knowledge of a world much wider than that of the narrowly focused technical disciplines. Education in literature, history, political science, economics and the arts is intended to prepare graduates to be well-rounded contributors to the vitality of society.

College preparation, including ensuring that students understand the value of higher education, remains a primary responsibility for high schools, even as they improve vocational offerings. That, after all, fits the comprehensive high school ideal.