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Superintendents' Forum: Economic conditions have changed career opportunities (6/9/10)

By Dr. Paul Eaken
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As we rapidly approach graduation day, many seniors will be pursuing further education, including four year colleges and vocational and technical training.

I, along with a team from Berks County, recently attended a program on career and technical education at Temple University. The purpose of the program was to discuss the education and training requirements for students who will be entering the work force in the next decade.



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The keynote speaker was Dr. Robert Garraty, Pennsylvania's Deputy Secretary of Labor, who noted that the current economic environment has changed the career opportunities for students.

In recent years, Pennsylvania permanently lost 20 percent of its manufacturing and 16 percent of retail jobs, Garraty said. As a result, many high school graduates enter college without a clear idea of what they would like to study. Half of the students who have not declared a major drop out during their freshman year.

I am pleased to report that public schools across the county have integrated career education into their curricula.

For example, Fleetwood School District's elementary school career month involves discussions about careers, assembly programs and parents sharing information about their careers.

In the middle school, a career fair is held every other year and eighth-grade students create a career portfolio that they complete during high school.

By the time students reach high school, they have selected a career pathway in one of the following areas: industrial/engineering; health; science; human services; arts and humanities; or business.

A career-research project is completed during ninth grade, and a career job shadow during 11th grade. Students learn that education beyond high school is essential to obtaining a good job.

The Workforce Alliance, as part of its Skills2Compete Campaign, completed a review of jobs that will be available in the next decade - "America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Education and Training Requirements in the Next Decade and Beyond."

The study concluded that nearly half of the employment available in the United States will involve middle-skill occupations. This compares with 33 percent of the anticipated job openings in high-skill occupations and 22 percent in the service occupations.

Middle-skill occupations require specific training and education beyond high school but do not require a four-year college degree. Examples of these jobs include health care, construction, transportation, production and mechanical technicians.

Over the past few years, many middle-skill occupations, particularly in the health care field, experienced significant increases in the number of employees needed.

[+] Enlarge.



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Reading Area Community College has created programs to support students in developing the skills necessary for both middle- and high-skill careers. Students may enter the work force upon completion of the RACC program or pursue a bachelor's degree.

RACC has entered partnerships with employers and universities to develop specific programs for students. For example, they offer a program in Electric Utility Technology in partnership with FirstEnergy Corporation to prepare students for employment in the electric utility industry.

In conjunction with Pennsylvania State University, RACC also offers a nanoscience technology program that prepares students as skilled technicians for jobs in biotechnology, automation, optics and robotics. These programs are in addition to their offerings in accounting, computer technology, and medical secretary, to name just a few.

Berks County students have many opportunities for furthering their education after high school. The need for further education is clear; the type and amount of education should be determined by the student's career choice.

I wish this year's high school graduates the best of luck in pursuing their career choice.

