

EvanstonReview

ETHS provides many paths to career success

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In times past, Evanston Township High School has been so focused on preparing students to enroll in a 4-year college that students whose circumstances didn't conform to that game plan had difficulty envisioning much of a future.

But ETHS students can now kick-start a career path before they even toss their graduation caps into the air.

In the last few years, ETHS has launched three certification programs that allow students to earn an entry-level credential in a field that can lead to a well-paying job. Already, combined enrollment in the three programs has jumped from 17 students in 2006-07 to 47 last year.

With the help of a \$100,000 grant from the Owen L. Coon Foundation, the school is laying the groundwork to launch additional certification programs over the next four years.

On the way up

"Our plan is to help kids get to that first step on the ladder, so they'll go on to some form of post-secondary training, where they can get additional certification," said Shelley Gates, chair of the applied sciences and technologies department. "I think it will give kids a lot of incentive to go on to community college or other post-secondary training institution," thus enabling them to earn a higher salary.

About one-half of all jobs in Illinois are considered "middle-skill" occupations -- that is, they require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

"These 'forgotten middle' positions represent nearly a million Illinois job openings during the decade that ends in 2014 and there is a shortage of workers to fill them," Gates said.

A state-by-state report on "America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," released Sept. 22, refuted the view that the nation is becoming an "hourglass economy" with employment concentrated in high-skilled fields and low-wage service jobs.

The right prescription

Currently, ETHS students can earn certification as a pharmaceutical technician through a partnership with Walgreen Company. Juniors and seniors work as interns, attend classes conducted by Walgreen's pharmacists and prepare for the National Pharmacy Technician Certification Examination.

In a joint venture with the Presbyterian Homes, students who've successfully completed a health sciences rotation can acquire the training -- over the course of a summer -- to become certified as a nursing assistant.

While many teens have some knowledge of how to use a Microsoft office program, courses in Microsoft Word, Power Point and Excel allow students to hone their skills to the level sought by employers. Microsoft created the credential after employers complained that new hires often weren't as proficient with a software program as they'd claimed on their application.

As seen on TV

ETHS' certification courses in Word, Power Point and Excel teach the basics that are similar to those advertised by private firms for fees ranging from \$495 to \$1,500. The exams themselves can cost between \$70 to \$100 a crack, but ETHS students can take them for free. About half of the students who were enrolled in the classes in 2007-08 successfully passed the exams.

The school is shaping its early childhood training program to fit the requirements of the Level I credential required of child care providers in Illinois. Gates hopes to be able to offer that credential to students during the 2009-2010 school year.

The school has begun aligning its automotive technology curriculum with the Automotive Service Excellence standards with an eye on allowing aspiring auto technicians to acquire a much-respected ASE credential in high school. Using a portion of the Coon Foundation grant, the school recently purchased an ASE-approved textbook series covering the gamut from suspension, steering and braking systems to engine performance, auto electricity and electronics.

"The good thing about the auto technician field is that it can't be outsourced," Gates said. "Somebody in another country," she noted, "cannot fix your car."