

CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN SOUTHWEST OHIO

This month our discussion is about career technical (formerly known as “vocational”) education in Hamilton, Butler, and Warren Counties. What is it, where is it, how is it funded, and what does it offer? The League’s Education Committee met with representatives from four local public education facilities that specialize in career technical education. Admittedly, our research was very basic, and there is indeed much to be said on the topic that we didn’t investigate. That said, we were truly amazed at what this segment has to offer to today’s students and at the success they appear to be having in this 21st Century.

We used to call this specialized program “Vocational Education” because its purpose was to teach some students the skills or trades they would need to pursue a career in the workplace. Vocational training for young people certainly is not a new pursuit. For centuries, youths were apprenticed to various tradesmen at very tender ages. In the nineteenth century, education of this sort concentrated on specific trades such as printing, bakery work, mill work, blacksmith work, dress- and hat-making, etc. The early twentieth century added such trades as automobile mechanic, welding, plumbing, and other more modern skills and began to offer such courses in public schools. In 1917, Congress passed the Smith-Hughes Act, which mandated that every state provide vocational education in agriculture, home economics, industry, and trades. But it was during this time that vocational education was associated more with lower social classes and became somewhat stigmatized.

By the latter part of the twentieth century, however, technological progress was picking up speed in multiple endeavors. It became obvious that more skill and expertise were necessary to operate and maintain equipment that was increasingly complex. Societal needs in the fields of health, human services, information technology, public safety, and others also demanded a workforce with specialized skills and expertise. “Vocational” education expanded to “Career and Technical” education and appealed to students from all social levels and ages. The stigma began to fade.

We examined four public entities that offer career and technical training in our region: the Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development, Cincinnati Public Schools, Warren County Career Center, and Butler County Career and Technical Center. Our findings are detailed below.

Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development

Overview: Founded in 1972, Great Oaks is “the largest career-technical school district in the country.”¹ Its main facilities are contained on four campuses located throughout our region: Diamond Oaks in western Hamilton County, Laurel Oaks in Wilmington, Live Oaks in Milford, Scarlet Oaks in Sharonville. They also have programs based in other locations, including some college campuses and at some of the affiliated school districts.

The Great Oaks district serves 36 school districts in Southwest Ohio, including every school district in Hamilton County except Cincinnati Public and Northwest. Districts outside Hamilton County include some in Brown, Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Fayette, Greene, Highland, Madison, Pickaway, Ross, and Warren Counties. From all of these districts, Great Oaks provides a learning environment for over 8,000 youth and 52,500 adults each year. Great Oaks actively markets itself in the various schools within its purview to advise students of benefits Great Oaks can offer.

Governance is provided by a 35-member board of directors who are appointed by the boards of education in the affiliated school districts. Those districts in Hamilton County are represented by the Hamilton County Educational Service Center.

Programs: At its four campuses and satellite locations, Great Oaks offers students a choice of 40 career majors that are organized in nine “pathways”: Automotive and Power Technology, Business Technology and Marketing, Communications Technology, Construction and Maintenance, Consumer and Community Services, Environmental Science and Agriculture, Health, Industry and Engineering, and Information Technology. Once a student determines a field of concentration,

¹ “Introducing Great Oaks,” p.1

he/she takes specific courses that lead to graduation (diploma) as well as a career-technical certificate and a Career Passport.

Students generally start their studies at Great Oaks when they are juniors, although there are some programs where they begin as seniors. The home school assigns students to the campus nearest to them; most campuses offer the same basic career courses. If the student chooses a course that is offered only at one campus, he/she may attend at that campus if an opening exists. Normally a student spends 2-3 hours each day in classes related to his/her career choice, and the rest of the time is spent on general academic coursework, such as English, Math, Science, etc.

Although Great Oaks prepares its students for work following graduation, it does encourage them to continue their education at the college level. The district offers Post-Secondary Options, which are courses qualified students may take for college credit. These options include coursework in English, Math, Sociology, and Science. Great Oaks coordinates this effort with Hocking College; students' earned credits are transferable to other colleges in Ohio.

Within a year of graduation, more than 97% of Great Oaks graduates are employed, enrolled in post-secondary education, or serving in the military.

The district's Gateway to Success program is designed for those who have not finished high school. Through a partnership with UC Clermont, Southern State at Wilmington, and Cincinnati State, these individuals can return to class and earn their high school diplomas on a college campus. About 12% of these students then continue at that institution to further their education and training.

Great Oaks offers Project Search for students with disabilities; it's a business-led program with a goal of employment for those who complete it. About 25% of their students are special-needs youngsters who have individual education plans (IEP), a legal mandate/requirement to ensure their needs are known and met.

An important component of Great Oaks' offerings is their Adult Education program, where approximately 50,000 people per year participate in a full

range of classes. Many of these people are those who have lost their jobs because of the economy, but others participate to learn new skills, upgrade the skills they have, or to branch out into new careers. There is a fee for attending adult education classes. By a year after completion, 99% of adults who take a full course of study are employed or continuing their education.

Finances: Great Oaks is a public school and is supported by State and Federal education funding and local property taxes. A 2-mill, 10-year levy was recently renewed by voters who live in the Great Oaks district and provides 70% of the institution's budget. The remaining 30% is provided by Ohio (\pm \$2,000 per student) and some federal grants that are designated for specific use. Students must purchase their own toolkits, which can be expensive; there is help available for those who need it.

Cincinnati Public Schools

Overview: The career-technical program in Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) is organized differently from the other three districts that we investigated. In 2001, CPS restructured its high schools into smaller units with focused programs. This approach has worked well at retaining high school students, as the district's graduation rate has increased by 31 points since 2000. With the large schools now divided into smaller, somewhat independent units, it was possible to integrate different career-technical education programs into the various buildings along with the traditional academic curriculum.

Introduction to career-technical education begins in Grade 8. An eighth-grader in CPS must choose the high school which he/she wants to attend. Prior to making this selection, the student is given a "Kuder" assessment to determine where his/her strengths and interests lie. The district has adopted 11 Kuder Career Clusters (out of 16) and has established tracks for them in specific high schools. The eighth-grader can then use the results of his/her assessment in choosing which high school he/she wishes to attend.

A PLAN test is given to all tenth-graders; this is a practice test for the ACT test used by colleges. Each student receives feedback on his/her performance on areas of strength and weakness, which enables the student to work to eliminate the

weak areas indicated on the PLAN test. Each student is then asked to complete a career interest survey and is advised as to what sort of career he/she might choose.

Following the PLAN test and its follow-up, a student will then use a tool provided by the Ohio Career Information Services (OCIS) to match his/her career survey results with a Kuder career cluster.

All of the above steps are geared to helping students choose a high school program that meets their needs academically and career-wise.

Programs: CPS has aligned the Kuder Career Clusters with its "Career Pathways," which are offered at its high schools. A "fair" is held in January or February each year where eighth graders have an opportunity to meet representatives of the various high schools, examine their programs, and determine where they want to attend. The Career Clusters and the high schools where they are offered are:

Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources

Riverview East Academy
Environmental Studies
Hughes Center
The Zoo Academy

Architecture & Construction

Woodward Career Technical H.S.
Building Technologies

Arts, A/V Tech. & Communications

School for the Creative & Performing Arts

Education & Training

Hughes STEM
Teaching Technologies

Finance

Withrow International H.S.
Academy of Finance

Gov't. and Public Admin.

Aiken College & Career H.S.

Health Science

Hughes STEM
Health Sciences

Woodward Career Technical H.S.
Health Technologies

Hospitality & Tourism

Dater HS
Culinary Arts

Information Technology

R. A. Taft Information Tech. H.S.
IT Network Administration
IT Computer Programming

Public Safety, Corrections & Security

Withrow International H.S.
Law and Paralegal Studies

Manufacturing

Woodward Career Technical H.S.
Advanced Manufacturing

Science, Technology, Engin. & Math

Hughes STEM
Engineering Futures

Western Hills Engineering H.S.
Engineering

Woodward Career Technical H.S.
Advanced Manufacturing

The core curriculum is integrated into the career technical path. Ninth and tenth graders take core academics in addition to their career pathways subjects. The junior and senior years are then devoted to the selected career program. There are still "college prep" courses available in the high schools, and every high school has some AP courses for qualified students. These students, upon passing the AP test, can receive college credits for those courses.

CPS coordinates with the business community to determine what type of courses are required to educate students for projected employment needs. In some cases there are internships available—mostly unpaid—to give kids needed experience.

The Perkins Core Indicator Report for FY 2008-09 indicated that 98.79% of career technical students at CPS completed the program and graduated. Of those, 91.3% were enrolled in post secondary education or advanced training, were in the military, or were employed.

Finances: CPS's career technical programs are funded by the regular per pupil allocation from the State + monies that are set aside by Ohio specifically for this type of education.

Warren County Career Center (WCCC)

Overview: The Warren County Career Center was founded in 1976 and is affiliated with the Warren County JVSD Career-Technical Planning District (CTPD). Students from six school districts may take advantage of WCCC's course offerings: Franklin City SD, Kings Local SD, Lebanon City SD, Little Miami Local SD, Springboro Community City SD, and Wayne Local SD. Their many programs serve 2000 high school students, 8,000 adult students, 200 GED students, and 20 developing and special-needs pre-school students.

The Center offers open enrollment to students from the six affiliated districts. They do work actively to recruit students and to overcome the negative perceptions many students have about who selects career-technical education over the more traditional "academic" approach. Counselors visit the partner schools to advise students on what programs are available to them, and students then visit the campus in November. Following that visit, students then select four programs of interest. Since some programs cover Grades 9-12, WCCC sponsors campus tours for eighth graders.

Most WCCC students enter the program as juniors; young people who have attended one of the associated high schools for two years, who are at least 16 years of age, and who have earned at least eight high school credits and are on track to graduate are automatically eligible to enter WCCC. They graduate from their home district high school, but attain a Career Passport and a career-technical certificate for work done at WCCC.

Programs: WCCC works with business advisory groups to determine what types of courses are needed by its students. It offers 27 high school

programs, many of which include some college credit and/or certification. The subject matter of these career courses is exhaustive, covering material from an Aerospace Academy to Welding and Metal Fabrication. Additionally, every student is expected to acquire further training after graduation...college (2 or 4-year), the military, or an apprenticeship. Teachers may use their career experience when beginning to teach at WCCC, but they are required to take education courses and obtain a Masters Degree within 10 years.

The WCCC has an extensive list of offerings in Adult Education. Enrollment in this segment, in both full- and part-time classes has doubled in the last two years, as many folks are retraining due to job losses. The completion rate in this program is 97.7%, with a 100% post-program placement rate.

Project Search is a one-year program designed for students with disabilities who are in their last year of high school. Its goal is to prepare those students for entry-level employment and enable these individuals to obtain meaningful employment and lead productive lives. WCCC partners with the Otterbein-Lebanon Retirement Community and holds classes on the Otterbein campus.

Through its Gateway to Success program, WCCC gives those students who have not obtained their high school diplomas the opportunity to do so. The program is located at Miami University Middletown and is designed to meet the individual student's needs. In addition to accruing the necessary credits for a high school diploma, the student can explore career options and take beginning-level college courses at MU Middletown. This option is open to folks who have been out of school for at least a year and whose class has graduated.

Funding: Funding is tight for WCCC. The state has restructured its funding for traditional schools, but has supplied the Center with only +.75% of its previous funding. Additionally, Ohio has capped its support and WCCC will be held to last year's amounts.

The last local operating levy was passed in 1990; a permanent improvement levy on the November, 2009 ballot failed. Those who take the Adult Education courses must pay tuition fees per course taken. High school students must pay for their own equipment, but there is assistance for those who cannot afford the total cost (about 26%

of their students qualify for free lunch; their fees are waived).

Equipment for the various career options is expensive to purchase and to maintain. Moreover, it must be kept up-to-date to be of value to the students. WCCC works with a business advisory committee to determine what is needed for each program in terms of both course work and equipment.

Butler Technology and Career Development Schools (Butler Tech, BT)

Overview: Butler Tech, as this career-technical high school is called, was founded 32 years ago. It is associated with every school district in Butler County except the Hamilton City School District; its jurisdiction also includes the Northwest School District in Hamilton County. Through their customized training, Butler Tech reaches students in eleven states. In 2008, the school served about 30,000 secondary and adult students at its campuses and satellite locations.

In July, 2009 BT received a national exemplary school award at the Model Schools Conference in Atlanta. It was selected from among 600 schools through the International Center for Leadership in Education, based in New York. The award is based on the institution's results and innovation.

Butler Tech attributes its success to its alignment with the "Baldrige Criteria," which focuses on continuous improvement. Every individual involved in BT's operation must be flexible enough to change and ensure that what they as individuals and BT as an institution do is driven by performance, not process. There are seven intertwined categories: Leadership, Strategic Planning, Customer Focus, Workforce Focus, Process Management, Financial. These categories are then subdivided into "Items" and "Areas to Address."

The school's governance is through the Ohio Board of Regents. This has helped them develop programs whereby their students can earn college credit for courses taken at BT. It also enables BT to offer more courses of this type to their students. In addition they have a local Board of Education made up of representatives from the schools with which BT is associated.

As with Great Oaks and Warren County, most students remain affiliated with a "home" school and enter one of the BT programs as juniors. Recruiting is done to pique interest starting with eighth-grade youngsters, when their programs are introduced. Recruiting efforts become more concentrated with tenth-grade students. Students are transported from their home schools to the BT campus where their program is housed. After accruing the required academic and technical credits, a student receives a diploma from his/her home school, certification and a Career Passport from BT.

Programs: Butler Tech has four campuses: D. Russel Lee Career Center, Natural Science Center, Greentree Health Science Academy, and the Public Safety Education Complex. They also operate a program, Options Academy - The Arts, at the Fitton Center in Hamilton.

Butler Tech's health-centered career training location is the Greentree Health Science Academy in Monroe. Over the past three years, enrollment has grown over 300%; their graduation rate is 96%, and their placement rate for graduates is 95% either in further education or in the workplace.

The D. Russel Lee Career Center offers students training in Auto Technology, Business Office Education, Carpentry, Construction Electricity, Cosmetology, Criminal Justice, and Culinary Arts to name a few. Additional career-technical courses are offered at the various associated high schools, e.g., Information and Programming and Software Development at Fairfield HS, Construction Engineering and Computer-Aided Design at Madison HS, Introduction to Engineering & Manufacturing Technology at New Miami HS, etc.

The program at the Fitton Center is an alternative program that offers career-technical training in dance, theatre arts, music and visual arts. Academic needs are met through participation in an on-line program that is self-directed. This alternative program has been in force for approximately five years.

Butler Tech's Natural Science Academy offers studies in equine and veterinary science, while the "Northern Campus" specializes in Public Safety: Fire, Police, Rescue.

BT works with community advisors to fill in programs they don't currently offer. Although funding shortages restrict their ability to meet all the needs, they do set priorities based on surveys of the businesses and trades in the region.

BT, like Great Oaks and Warren County, has an Adult Education program that serves 795 full-time students, but reaches over 14,000 students when part-timers are included. The fees for taking AE courses leading to some sort of credential range from \$11,000 for 1,400 hours to \$6,000 for 600 hours. Individual classes for adults cost about \$10 per hour and usually last from 3 to 10 hours. Students are eligible for Pell grants and other financial aid. Instructors at this level must have five years of experience and be certified by the state. BT also partners with some trade unions to train students in careers generally associated with construction.

Project Search and Project Life are programs designed for students with disabilities. Project Life combines a work and education experience for young people who have completed their high school academic requirements but haven't obtained their diplomas. It offers work in a life-skills lab to prepare these special students for independent living and job preparedness. Project Search transitions students with disabilities into the world of work through a one-year internship.

Butler Tech does have many opportunities for its students to earn college credits for courses completed at the high school level. Indeed, students are encouraged to pursue further training after graduation at a 2- or 4-year college, the military, or an apprenticeship in a business.

Finances: Butler Tech receives 61% of its operating revenue from State and Federal Grants, 2% from Other Revenues, 15% from Tuition and Fees, and 22% from Property Taxes. This last category (\$11.7M) is funded by a 1.93 mill permanent levy that has been in force since 1975.

The material presented here is simply an overview of the many approaches to career-technical education in our region. The concepts, courses, and goals of career-tech are completely different from what most of us remember as "vocational" education. It is time for many of us to take a new look at what is possible for students in our region's public high schools. It truly is education that is aimed at the requirements of the 21st Century, and it is education that will prepare our young people for a productive future.

Below are some suggested discussion questions for you to discuss in your units:

What were vocational education programs like when you were growing up?

Have you ever taken one of the adult classes offered at a career technical school? If so, what was it like?

Do you think the career-technical programs in SW Ohio are meeting the needs of their students? Of the general population?

How can career-technical schools be provided with a more solid financial foundation?

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