

Superintendent Shawn Dilly's column 8/31

In Transforming Our Schools one of the first things we need to do is define what our high school graduates should look like.

In his presentation at our opening day meeting, Dr. Kevin Fleming helped us begin that process by pointing out that for too long the “one-way to win philosophy” of focus on four-year degrees as the only path to success doesn't work.

In the traditional, comprehensive high school, academic and technical preparation have historically been offered as separate trajectories for different students. Despite the criticism of this either/or view, its legacy has remained strong, Dr. Fleming pointed out.

Vocational education in the past was perceived as limiting the educational potential for many students. Career and Technical Education (CTE) – when done correctly – provides students a path both to further education and advanced career opportunities.

In 2013, the West Virginia Department of Education defined career readiness as involving three major areas:

- Core academic skills and the ability to apply those skills in concrete situations in order to function in the workplace and in routine daily activities;
- employability skills (that include critical thinking and responsibility) that are essential in any career area; and
- technical, job-specific skills related to a specific career pathway.

These are the skills that allow students to enter true career pathways that offer gainful employment and opportunities for advancement.

Traditionally statistics have shown that, on average, a person with a college degree earns far more money than the average person without a high school diploma. It is this belief that has led to a philosophy that you need to get more degrees to make more money. But, this has been far from true for 100 percent of our students. In reality, only 10 percent of 9th graders actually win at that game.

In West Virginia, 41.44 percent of 9th graders eventually enroll in any college anywhere; 58 percent do not. Further, 22.38 percent of 9th graders graduate from a four-year university in West Virginia, 77 percent do not.

If you look at studies that look at the actual skills and education needed for jobs in our economy nationally, only one-third require a four-year degree or higher. Dr. Fleming told us to remember the number 57. That is the predicted number of jobs requiring four-year degree for every 100 people who earn one.

Dr. Fleming talked about the fact that the three R's we have learned have not been put in the context of labor market shifts and industry demands. So, to those original three R's, he adds a fourth, relevance, and a fifth, reality.

“Education without relevance is useless,” he said. “There needs to be a good answer to the question, ‘why do I need to learn this?’”

As for the reality of education, Dr. Fleming said, “We have to start talking real about what it really takes to be successful in life. And the truth is, skills trump degrees.”

I agree with Dr. Fleming. I believe that we must fight for the opportunity and access for students from any background that have either the interest, ability, aptitude or desire for a broader curriculum.

This can be done with high schools that have linked learning pathways as part of their educational portfolio.

As we move forward we will begin to see more and more collaboration among our staff, with business, parents, and the community.

Dr. Fleming's video “Success in the New Economy” can be found on YouTube. He currently serves dual roles at Norco College as the Dean of Instruction for Career and Technical Education and as the Principal Investigator for the National Center for Supply Chain Technology Education funded by the National Science Foundation.

The Mineral County Advisory Committee, developed out of the Community Education Summit in May, will hold its first meeting of the school year in September. The committee's role will be to advise the superintendent during the Transformation process and make recommendations. The group is made up of interested community members from various backgrounds.

A teacher advisory group has also been established whose members are educators from each of the county's schools who have volunteered to participate. The two groups will have at least one meeting together during the year.

We have several readily available resources to help us during this process of creating a framework from which make decisions and changes. Among them are two books. We have already talked about "Deeper Learning," by Monica R. Martinez and Dennis McGrath. The second is "Creative Schools," by Ken Robinson. Both are easy to read and very informative for parents and non-educators to understand the process we are undertaking.

The purpose of this process of Transforming Our Schools in Mineral County is to expand opportunities for students to grow and develop a love of learning that will carry them through a lifetime of success.

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