

Pro & Con: An Avenue to High Academic Standards

by Lynn Olson

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Lynn Olson is a senior editor at Education Week, a national newspaper that covers topics in K-12 education. Her new book, The School-To-Work Revolution: How Employers and Educators Are Joining Forces To Prepare Tomorrow's Skilled Workforce, is published by Addison-Wesley.

At age 16, Erika Pyne of Kalamazoo, Michigan, was a fairly typical high school student. "I had absolutely no idea of what I was going to do with my life, and that really frustrated me," she recalls. Enrolled in a high school program that emphasized science and mathematics, she did not see any connection between her courses and what she might do in the future.

Then, as a high school junior, she enrolled in a school-to-work program run by the Education for Employment Consortium in Kalamazoo. For the next two years, she spent part of each school day taking classes at Bronson Methodist Hospital, learning about such topics as anatomy and medical terminology. She also spent time observing and talking with health-care professionals and getting hands-on work experience. As a senior in high school, Erika interned afternoons on the family-care unit at Borgess Medical Center, where she helped out in the delivery room. "It was great. I just loved it," she says. "I had all these wonderful experiences that most people my age couldn't talk about. I fell in love with health care."

When I last spoke with her, Erika was a patient-care assistant at Bronson and a junior at Western Michigan University, where she was enrolled in a nursing program. Eventually, she planned to earn a degree as a physician's assistant so that she would have more authority and flexibility than a nurse.

"Why do I have to learn this?"

Erika was one of many students whom I met during a year spent researching school-to-work programs around the country. And her story is not atypical.

High-quality school-to-work programs combine learning in school and in the workplace. They teach students rigorous academic content as well as practical skills. They engage students in active, hands-on learning rather than teaching solely from textbooks. And they build bridges between high schools, higher education and the workplace to help young people prepare for both careers and college.

Studies suggest that school-to-work can help address one of the greatest problems in education:

motivation. Many students don't think that what they learn in school really counts. A majority of American teenagers in national surveys describe their education as "boring." Although they think it's important to graduate, they don't think that doing well in school matters. In one 1996 survey, most students described themselves as sliding by in school. Two-thirds admitted they could do better if they tried.

School-to-work can help young people answer the question, "Why do I have to learn this?" by showing how what students learn in school can be used now and in the future. Research from Jobs For the Future, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, the Office of Technology Assessment, and Mathematica Policy Research Inc. all reach basically the same conclusion: well-structured school-to-work activities can slash boredom and re-engage students in schooling.

Creating a desire to learn

A prominent misconception surrounding school-to-work is that it downplays intellectual achievement. But far from jettisoning academics, well-structured school-to-work programs can make learning come alive for students, by connecting the academic content that students learn in school with its use in the world outside the classroom.

Evidence suggests that school-to-work can encourage students to take more academic coursework -- not less. A 1994 evaluation of ProTech, a school-to-work program in Boston, found that students who participated took more rigorous math and science courses than their peers, although their grades were not substantially better. In 1993, a study of the seven most improved sites that belong to the "High Schools That Work" consortium found that these schools had managed to significantly close the achievement gap between college-bound and career-bound students in just three years. High schools that belong to the consortium pledge to replace low-level, watered-down courses with a solid academic core. Similarly, at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon, enrollment in physics, algebra 2, and chemistry classes has increased since the school launched its school-to-work efforts in the early 1990s.

While such results are hardly conclusive, they demonstrate the promise of well-structured school-to-work activities.

Finally, school-to-work can encourage young people to pursue education and training beyond high school. In sites ranging from Kalamazoo to Boston, high percentages of young people involved in school-to-work initiatives are choosing to pursue postsecondary education because they understand the connection between learning and a good job. Many of these programs report college-going rates among

their graduates of about 80%, compared with about 62% nationally. Other studies have found that while school-to-work graduates do not attend college at higher rates, those who do are more likely to declare a college major and to earn more college credits.

Worth doing ... worth doing right

In most of the communities that I visited, school-to-work was a grassroots effort. Sometimes educators began a program after they realized that many of their students were going straight into the workplace or to college without being prepared for that transition. Other times, employers approached schools because of specific labor shortages in their community, or because they were concerned that high school graduates lacked the skills to succeed. These grassroots efforts are spreading slowly, but steadily.

School-to-work needs to be done well, making sure the academics are rigorous. Improperly structured, school-to-work could offer low-level curricula and channel students into narrow job training. That is exactly what we don't need. We must always demand quality.

Today, both employers and colleges want people who can read and do math; frame and solve problems; communicate orally and in writing; use computers; and work in teams. Schools need to do a better job of preparing all young people for this future.

Not every school-to-work program is right for every student. But good school-to-work activities can provide choices and opportunities for young people, many of whom are not now well served by our education system. Done right, school-to-work can be a powerful tool in the effort to achieve higher academic standards and a more educated citizenry.