

Vocational Training Is Back as Firms Pair With High Schools to Groom Workers

CVS, Tesla and others help educators create skills-based programs—and future job candidates



Coventry High School established its vocational training program after Electric Boat, one of Rhode Island's largest employers, declared it was looking to hire 14,000 new employees in the next decade. Students learn skills that could lead to job offers. PHOTO: JESSE BURKE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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By

Michelle Hackman

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COVENTRY, R.I. — Gabe Schorner never considered himself a good student until he enrolled in his high school's new welding program, where, in an industrial-style classroom, Mr. Schorner found himself enchanted by the molten metal and its bright blue glow as he molded it.

The skills he picked up led directly to a full-time offer from Electric Boat, the Rhode Island-based submarine manufacturer, where he is now making \$16.50 an hour. "I don't like the idea of going to college — I wanted to avoid taking on that debt and everything else," Mr. Schorner said. "Being out in the world is a lot more fun."

Coventry High School established its welding program after Electric Boat, one of the state's largest employers, declared it was looking to hire 14,000 new employees in the next decade.

The company wasn't finding enough recruits coming out of college. So it turned to high schools — where students can be discovered early, and the training is free.

Such direct ties between big companies and local high schools are multiplying. [Volkswagen](#) is helping schools in Tennessee modernize their engineering programs; Tesla is partnering with Nevada schools on an advanced manufacturing curriculum; and fisheries in Louisiana have created courses for students to train for jobs in "sustainability."

The renewed popularity of so-called career education programs marks a shift away from the idea that all students should get a liberal-arts education designed to prepare them for college.

Schools are once more deciding it is worth intervening in the lives of students who might not have the academic prowess, or the financial footing, to pursue bachelor's degrees, and instead equip them with skills for steady employment. Nationally, the number of high-school students concentrating in career education has risen 22% over the past decade, to 3.6 million.

The idea has gained currency with politicians, many of whom say technical and career programs can [widen the pool of workers](#) in a tight labor market. The U.S. had 6.66 million [unfilled job openings](#) at the end of June, just below the highest level on record back in 2000, according to the Labor Department. And [the jobless rate](#), at 3.9%, is near lows rarely seen in the past half-century.



Rhode Island has partnered with companies like CVS, which helped set up a program that trains students to become pharmacy technicians. It features a mock CVS pharmacy with color-coded medicine bins and dummy magazines at the checkout counter. PHOTO: JESSE BURKE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Businesses are searching hidden corners of the population to find people with skills they need. For some, that means looking beyond college graduates toward high-school students who might grow into jobs in plants, fisheries and beyond.

A disproportionate share of working-age adults outside the labor force don't have college degrees, White House economists said in [a paper released last month](#). Providing vocational skills to those now entering the labor force could set them up for better career prospects, some experts say.

That includes governors, who are clamoring to work with their states' companies to shape curricula. "For a long time, there was a little bit of a stigma around vocational training," said Gina Raimondo, Rhode Island's Democratic governor, but "no matter what neighborhood you're from, you deserve a chance to get a job."

The rapid change in thinking, however, has some parents and advocates worried that students who are poorer or less academically inclined will be funneled into such programs, cutting their career choices at an early stage. By tailoring programs specifically to individual companies, they say, the programs risk handicapping students who want, or need, to make a switch later.

“The culture is so vulnerable to thinking that some children are just not very smart and they should be given a less-challenging course of instruction,” said Jeannie Oakes, an emeritus education professor at UCLA.

Supporters say the focus on existing job openings makes more sense than the earlier approach, which trained students in skills like cosmetology or culinary arts regardless of demand.

The current pattern traces back to 1983, when President Reagan created a commission to study why American schools were failing to fill so many Cold War-era technical jobs. Its report, titled “[A Nation at Risk](#),” concluded that not enough students were being prepared for college and urged high schools to raise their academic standards, eliminating many vocational programs in the process.

Over the next 30 years, the number of students entering college swelled: in 2015, 1.9 million people earned bachelor’s degrees, up from 980,000 in 1985.

Many students took on significant debt to finance their higher education, and some remain unable to pay off loans. That has made industry certificates, which students in the Electric Boat welding program receive, increasingly attractive.

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In Rhode Island, Gov. Raimondo has redirected funds from lower-performing training programs toward newer ones in information technology, engineering and welding.

The state has partnered with companies like CVS, which helped set up a curriculum at Davies High School, north of Providence, that trains students to become pharmacy technicians. It features a mock CVS pharmacy with color-coded medicine bins and dummy magazines at the checkout counter.

At Coventry High School, Electric Boat provided welding instructors with a curriculum designed to equip students with the technical skills to work on its submarines.

The instructor, Jamie Cotnoir, said welding attracts a mix of students, but he said slackers can’t succeed in the program, which requires fastidious attention to detail around 6000-degree furnaces.

Still, the welding program is itself a cautionary tale: the high school ran a similar program with Electric Boat through the 1990s, but closed it after the company experienced a downturn and laid off workers.

That is a risk, some economists say. “The hot thing in their industry might not be the hot thing two years from now,” said Don Coursey, an economist at the University of Chicago.

Educators are seeking to avoid the mistakes of earlier programs, which were narrowly tailored and sometimes closed off graduates from college. Students in the new programs are often required to take academic classes, including enough English and math, to satisfy precollege requirements.

Tony Carnevale, head of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, said a careful balance must be struck, because overemphasizing liberal arts can hurt a program’s effectiveness at job training.

He cited research showing that career education concentrators [earn just 90 cents per hour more](#) than students with a regular high school diploma, though that figure doesn’t include students earning industry certificates.

“It is a confused space at the moment,” Mr. Carnevale said. “It is hard to predict where it goes next.”

For Mr. Schorner, the toughest critics initially were his own parents. His mother and stepfather, who considered welding too dirty and dangerous for him, told him they didn’t want him to give up on college.

“Now they’ve kind of seen all the stuff I’ve been doing,” he said. “I guess they’re confident with my choices now.”

Write to Michelle Hackman at Michelle.Hackman@wsj.com