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Opinion: Life Readiness for All

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More than ever, today's students must prepare for a variety of opportunities after high school, including further education and training, as well as entry into the workforce. Our rapidly transforming and technology-driven society demands that students know more than academic content. They must learn to do the creative and non-routine work that machines can't do. They must demonstrate knowledge of how to learn and solve problems, continually build upon their developing knowledge and skills, and adapt to an ever-changing and hard-to-predict future. Students must also develop effective communication skills, and learn how to work both collaboratively and competitively, depending on the context, in order to find success.

In essence, students can no longer afford to prepare for college *or* the workplace. Every student must prepare for both work *and* life-long learning, including earning industry recognized credentials or postsecondary education. Instead of asking, "Where are you going to college?" we should ask every child, "How will you continue your education and training?" We might consider the modern charge of public education as preparation for "life readiness."

In Vermont, we value equitable student access to both college and career readiness opportunities. With help from Governor Scott and the General Assembly, the Agency of Education recently created a new position that will work with both education and employer stakeholders to build a statewide system of training and educational opportunities in high-demand industries. Based in the state's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, these industries include health science, construction and green building design, advanced manufacturing, agriculture and natural resources, information technology/STEM, and hospitality and tourism.

A robust, state-endorsed system of articulated Career Pathways will link our students to well-paying jobs in Vermont's highest priority economic sectors, and the pathways will make clear how our students can take advantage of programs in middle and high school that develop essential skills and direction for career readiness. These career pathways will initially map onto programs in Career Technical Education (CTE) and work-based learning through their high schools. Next, the pathways will outline how adult learners and individuals looking to re-boot their career trajectories can jump back on the pathways to prepare for better opportunities.

As early as seventh grade, students can benefit from a number of opportunities made possible through the passage of Act 77 (Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion). Career exposure in early years introduces students to options they can pursue in high school and beyond. Now, students throughout the state can access multiple, affordable opportunities to expand their learning both inside and beyond the classroom. These opportunities include dual

enrollment and early college, work-based learning, online and hybrid learning, CTE, the High School Completion Program and expanded learning opportunities, like after school programs and targeted mentoring programs. These strategic investments illustrate Vermont's commitment to both college *and* career readiness.

One such Act 77 opportunity is work-based learning – supervised, credit-bearing experiences that involve student interactions with industry and community professionals. Work-based learning exposes students to specific postsecondary options, provides practice in necessary skill development, and allows students to reinforce and deepen their learning in an applied setting.

For example, one student who was not quite sure of his interests recently participated in a site-based learning experience on a local farm. Through a supervised work-based learning program, this student gained the much-needed experience, confidence and preparation for even more career-focused opportunities, involving less direct guidance and more autonomy. The following year, this student enrolled in a CTE program, where he continues to thrive. Experiences like these can particularly help students make the connection between academic learning and real world situations.

Across the state, our schools are working hard to guide our students as they take advantage of opportunities like work-based learning, CTE programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials, and post-secondary opportunities like dual enrollment and early college to achieve their goals. Through this work, we are not only investing in the future and success of our children, but in the future and success of our state, our economy, and ourselves.