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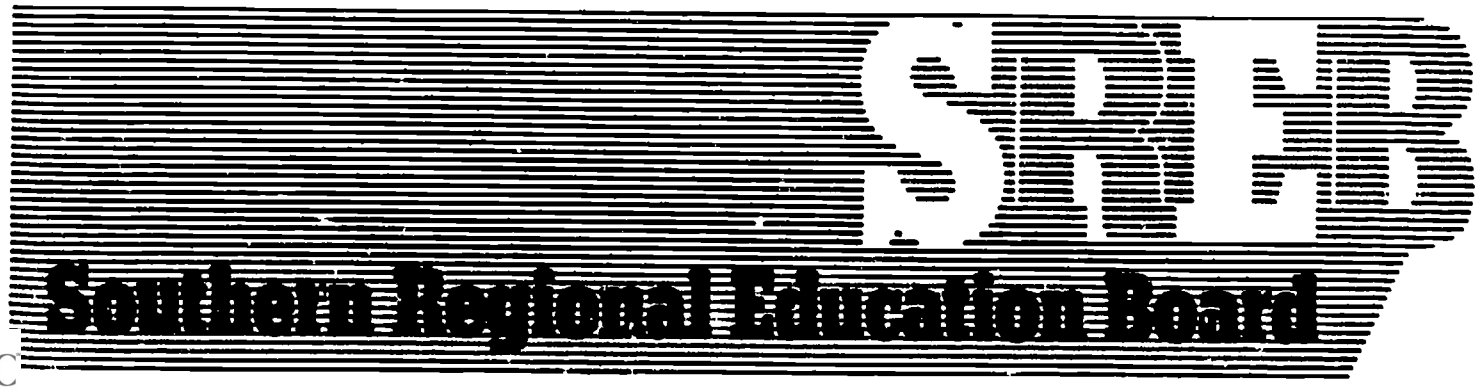
ABSTRACT

The Southern Regional Education Board's Commission for Educational Quality developed the following 10 recommendations for improving secondary vocational education programs in conjunction with academic achievement: (1) require students in vocational programs to meet the same basic skill standards on high school competency tests as any student seeking graduation; (2) recognize and/or redesign certain vocational high school courses to meet graduation requirements if such courses can be shown to lead to the mastery of specific learning outcomes of corresponding academic courses; (3) jointly develop, with assistance from both academic and vocational teachers, applied mathematics and science courses that take advantage of practical experiences; (4) remediate deficiencies in basic skills in poorly prepared students; (5) design pilot programs that link academic learning to practical vocational applications and meet academic graduation requirements; (6) concurrently, evaluate and strengthen teacher education programs to increase the academic competencies of vocational teachers and the applied teaching skills of academic teachers; (7) cooperate with employers and postsecondary institutions to develop "two plus two" programs in which a planned four-year curriculum connects the last two years of high school with two years of postsecondary study along with on-the-job learning; (8) encourage joint enrollment programs in which high school students who have completed the prerequisites enroll in postsecondary technical programs while completing high school; (9) redesign industrial arts courses to relate to modern technology; and (10) establish standards and initiatives for improving cooperative education as a method for on-the-job learning. (KC)

10 Recommendations for Improving Secondary Vocational Education

from the Southern Regional Education Board's Commission for Educational Quality



The Southern Regional Education Board's Commission for Educational Quality developed the following statement on improving the quality of secondary vocational education. The recommendations grew from a commitment to strengthen the role of vocational education to ensure that all secondary school students are encouraged, and expected, to develop academic skills, which should be the fundamental goal of all high schools. The Commission believes that the suggested actions will reinforce the contribution of vocational education in meeting modern social and economic needs.

A Priority: Academic Skills

Basic academic competencies in communication, computation, and applied science are fundamental to preparing young people for further learning, as well as for immediate employment upon high school graduation. Persons who lack basic academic competencies will remain in dead-end jobs, and will be unable to adjust to the shifting job market in a rapidly changing economy.

Accordingly, Southern educators and policymakers during the past four years have raised graduation requirements in the basic academic subjects for all students. While mastery of fundamental skills is essential for everyone, educators are faced with diversity of ability levels, interests, and future plans among high school students. Vocational education in the secondary school curriculum can be important in addressing this diversity among students.

The effectiveness of secondary vocational education, however, is currently being questioned. Some suggest it has fallen short on two counts: not always producing graduates who possess basic literacy and numerative skills; and, except in the office occupations programs, not having a strong record of leading graduates to employment in program-related jobs. Indeed, vocational education is perceived by some as a custodial program for low ability students who

cannot make it academically. Most would agree that vocational education has come to emphasize specific job preparatory goals instead of basic academic learning.

Vocational education can make a vital contribution to an upgraded secondary school curriculum if it is improved and refocused so that the development of basic academic skills is a high priority. Vocational education must become a strong partner in the movement to produce high school graduates with the necessary skills for further learning—on the job or in formal education. Secondary vocational education offers an alternative approach to the development of these skills, especially for students who grasp material more readily through applications than through abstract thinking. For example, some students may learn grammar more effectively through writing business letters instead of essays; others may come to understand geometry by calculating designs for a construction project rather than by solving workbook exercises.

The following strategies suggest the role of vocational education as a full partner in improving the academic skills of the region's high school students:

1 Require students in vocational programs to meet the same basic skill standards on high school competency tests as any student seeking graduation. Vocational educators should examine and redesign their curriculum to include a range and level of instruction in the same basic academic skills as required of academic-track students.

2 Recognize and/or redesign certain vocational high school courses to meet graduation requirements, if such courses can be shown to lead to the mastery of specific learning outcomes of corresponding academic courses. For example, if a "Business Letter Writing" course demonstrates that students gain writing skills, or if a "Business Mathematics" course leads to the mastery of computing percentages or applying statistical methods, then such courses could be considered as meeting high school graduation requirements.

3 Jointly develop, with assistance from both academic and vocational teachers, applied mathematics and science courses that take advantage of practical experiences to stress essential academic knowledge and skills. Currently-offered academic courses might be improved by integrating occupational applications into the curriculum.

4 Remediate deficiencies in basic reading, writing, and arithmetic in poorly prepared secondary students enrolled in vocational education courses. One strategy would be to use expert teachers in remedial education as team members with vocational educators. The new federal Vocational Education Act of 1984 includes special funding for disadvantaged students that might be used toward this objective.

Pilot Programs to Merge Vocational/Academic Education

The redesign and improvement of vocational education courses will be helped through the design of experimental models in which academic and vocational teachers cooperate to produce new curriculum.

The following recommendations are directed to developing pilot programs:

5 Each state should appoint a task force of academic and vocational teachers to design pilot courses and programs that link academic learning to practical vocational applications and meet academic graduation requirements. Funds for improvement of vocational programs under the new federal Vocational Education Act of 1984 may be used by states for this purpose. States also should consider appropriations of their own to subsidize these initiatives.

6 Concurrent with the development of such pilot programs, pre-service and in-service programs as well as state program and licensing standards should be evaluated and strengthened to promote the academic competencies of vocational teachers and the applied teaching skills of academic teachers.

Upgrading Vocational Programs

Secondary vocational education programs should be upgraded to match the new technological demands of the economy and to encourage participation by students from a wider range of academic abilities.

The following actions will help to prepare students for a highly technological society, and to fill shortages of technical and skilled workers:

7 High schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers together should develop "two plus two" programs in which a planned four-year curriculum connects the last two years of high school with two years of postsecondary study along with planned, on-the-job learning. The planned curriculum would include both academic and technical courses.

8 Joint enrollment programs should be encouraged in which high school students who have completed the prerequisites enroll in postsecondary technical programs while completing high school. Incentives are needed so that schools will not lose all of their average daily attendance financial allotments as they encourage high school students to also enroll in vocational-technical offerings in postsecondary institutions.

9 Industrial arts courses beginning with the 9th grade should be redesigned to include content related to modern technology, such as electronics. The widely offered traditional industrial art courses focus narrowly on woodshop or metal trades and do not meet the needs of today's world.

10 Standards and initiatives for improving cooperative education as a method for on-the-job learning should be established. For example, distributive education courses should require student placements in a variety of retail or wholesale settings that expose students to several functions, rather than concentrating assignments in jobs with no opportunity for advancement and that provide no real learning experience.

Improving Coordination and Accountability

While it is desirable to provide widespread access and reasonable choice of programs to students in both urban and rural areas, the values of access and choice are negated if programs are of poor quality or fail to lead to employment. Coordination and accountability are the two principles that should guide the restructuring of the delivery system of vocational-technical offerings.

Coordination

In each state there is an urgent need for coordination of vocational-technical programs across secondary *and* postsecondary institutions of various types. Such coordination is more likely to be successful if there is a specifically responsible coordinating body with the authority to assess the needs of vocational programs and to approve or disapprove programs. In large states, such coordinating bodies may be more effective on a regional level than on a statewide basis. In addition, it is helpful for these bodies to be composed primarily of lay members, particularly business and industrial employers of vocational students.

Coordination is particularly important to meet the needs of secondary students in the vast number of small high schools where it is impossible to offer a variety of quality vocational programs. Greater sharing of resources among high schools, school districts, and different levels of institutions is needed.

On-the-job training, in conjunction with secondary school vocational programs, should be expanded. The success of this strategy depends to a great extent on the cooperation of local employers. Training programs for advisory councils at the state and local levels are needed for more effective guidance of vocational programs.

Accountability

The evaluation of the effectiveness of vocational programs at all levels should be based on their missions. If programs at either the secondary or postsecondary levels have as their mission preparing young people for job entry, then placement rates are appropriate measures of program effectiveness. Full-time employment in jobs where graduates use skills acquired in such programs should be included in these evaluations.

Just as high schools are now using tests to determine student mastery of academic competencies, vocational programs should apply standards to student performance of occupational competencies. If necessary, states and local districts should require the development and implementation by vocational educators of such performance measures. The work of the Vocational Technical Consortium of the States (V-TECS) system, which has identified competency objectives for the tasks of some 300 occupations, might be used to develop these performance measures. As vocational courses are used to teach academic content in an applied manner, vocational courses should be evaluated on the extent of student mastery of such academic skills.

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