

*Until vocational education overcomes its separatism,
this area will not become fully effective . . .*

Impact of Area Vocational Schools

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AT this point the area vocational school represents an old concept under a new name. The term has recently come into widespread use because it appears in the Vocational Education Act of 1963. This Act describes and defines certain organizational patterns for offering vocational education at the high school and post high school levels and designates these as area vocational schools for the purposes of the law. Stimulated by the federal funds which this law provides, area schools and programs have appeared in many parts of the country, and more are being planned.

Shortly after the passage of the 1963 law Norman Harris wrote an article entitled "Redoubled Efforts and Dimly Seen Goals." He pointed out the danger that the renewed interest in vocational education, and the greatly increased funds being provided, could result in extending the already outmoded vocational programs of the past and present, rather than the development of new, imaginative, and realistic programs which are needed in an age of rapid technological, educational, and social change.

New Programs Needed

It is now apparent that the fears expressed by Harris are on their way to being realized, particularly at the secondary level. The programs which are emerging in many of the area vocational high schools are more suited to the society and the economy of 1925 than of 1970. The programs at the post high school level are more functional and more relevant, although frequently limited in scope and lacking in imagination.

An area vocational high school which has recently been opened in one state is fairly typical of many others which are being planned. Its program is described in a bulletin which has been released by its sponsors. It is housed in a new multi-million dollar building which is furnished with a million dollars' worth of elaborate equipment, and it is designed to serve high school students.

Each of the fourteen curriculums it offers is directed toward a different and highly specialized occupation. Thirteen of these are occupations which were commonly taught in most vocational schools in 1920. And, as in 1920, the students are required to devote half of each

day to shop instruction. During the remainder of the day they study fragmented bits of applied technical information, described as related mathematics and related science. They also study English and social studies, but the bulletin is careful to point out that these are taught as related to industry. There appears to be no provision in this program for the student to continue his education.

This is a clear example of a program of narrowly specialized job training, supplemented by a minimum of general education, and offered as a substitute for, rather than as a part of a high school education. Except for the new and modern building there is nothing to distinguish this school from the vocational school of forty or fifty years ago. With the nation in urgent need of future citizens who are prepared to understand the complex social, political, and economic issues they will be called upon to decide, this alternative to a high school education is, for the students it serves, a completely inadequate substitute.

The "Two Categories"

The assumption underlying this approach is that high school students fall neatly into two categories, the work bound and the college bound, and that each can be identified readily and early. This is a simplification that was never very tenable and is becoming less so every year. Forty percent of those who complete high school now proceed to some form of further full time education, and this trend is likely to increase as fast as post high school opportunities become available. Furthermore, all the research which has been reported shows that career choices made by youth of

high school age are premature and highly unstable. One of the findings of Project Talent, conducted by Flanagan and his associates, and based on a large national sample, was that 75 percent of the career choices made by boys when they were juniors in high school had been changed when the same boys were studied two years after graduating from high school.

In an advanced technological society like our own the most important job skills which a high school graduate can possess are those provided by general education. These are not only the most salable skills, but they are the most transferable to a wide variety of occupations. With few exceptions, employers place little weight upon specialized job skills learned in high school and this fact has been amply borne out by two recent studies of the graduates of vocational high schools.

The first is a study conducted by Eninger for the American Institute of Research, of graduates of trade and industrial programs. The second, entitled, "The Role of the Secondary Schools in the Preparation of Youth for Employment" was conducted by Kaufman and Schaefer at Pennsylvania State University. The Eninger study reported that only 30 percent of the vocational graduates were employed in the jobs they were trained for. The Kaufman and Schaefer study reported almost the same low percentage of job placements. Their study also included data from more than six hundred employers, who reported that no preference is given to vocational graduates in employment on the basis of their high school vocational studies. In discussing the adequacy of vocational education, Kaufman and Schaefer state:

From these findings (of the study) a clear case cannot be made that vocational education has a direct payoff in the occupational experiences of its graduates.

As a part of this same study, ninety union leaders were interviewed concerning their attitudes toward high school vocational education. They made it clear that the admission of young workers into apprenticeship training has no relationship to the curriculum pursued by the young person in high school. They stated that in selecting apprentices they were not interested in whether or not the applicant had followed a vocational program.

In the face of this kind of evidence it is difficult to understand the persistent effort of vocational educators to replicate in the developing area high schools the curricular patterns of the past. By the pragmatic test of employment results, if for no other reason, these patterns should be abandoned. There are, however, other and more educationally cogent reasons for doing so.

Lack of success in conventional academic courses is more apt to be the reason for assigning a student to a vocational program than any positive evidence that he is well suited to pursue the occupation he has selected. There are, of course, no reliable means for determining this in advance. The prospects that a student with low motivation for academic studies will find motivation and interest in a vocational course are not great. Available records show that the dropout rates from vocational courses are usually higher than the rates from academic programs in the same community.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for questioning the present area voca-

tional school development is its continuing commitment to separatism. The fact is that school success among students correlates significantly with the socioeconomic status of their parents. Children of lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to do less well scholastically and are therefore identified in large numbers as non-college bound.

The result, then, of separating high school students into the college bound and the vocational tracks, and sending them to separate schools, is equivalent to a classification and separation along socioeconomic lines. In some large cities the socioeconomic pattern is also largely a racial pattern, and therefore racial segregation is often the result of such practices. Whether racially segregated or not, the area vocational high school separates and stratifies youth physically, socially, and intellectually on the basis of their presumed occupational futures, at an age when the commonality of their learning experiences should be paramount.

Vocational training is not an acceptable alternative to education, but there are alternatives to vocational education in its present form which ought to be considered. Many of the educational and practical shortcomings of high school vocational education can be eliminated by converting it to a post high school program. This is where the area vocational school can serve best. It can offer whatever training is needed to the recent high school graduate, to the employed worker who needs to update his skills, to the unemployed adult, and to the returned high school dropout.

Some foresighted states have already established their area vocational schools at this level and others are in the process

of doing so. By the time a student has completed high school his occupational choices are considerably more realistic and more stable than they were a few years earlier. The general education he has completed and the added maturity he has gained enable him to profit more from the occupational education which is provided. They also make him more attractive to an employer as a potential employee.

Without the convenient escape route of vocational education, how can the high school meet the problem of the student who does not fit well into the traditional academic mold? Most of the present-day vocational programs are also quite traditional and appear to serve his needs no better, and housing them in buildings called area vocational schools will not change this.

One thing the high school can do is to develop curriculum approaches, materials, and teaching strategies which will make the needed general studies meaningful and desirable to the student with limited academic potential. It can also use, for some of these students, vocationally oriented concepts and activities as vehicles for achieving general learnings. This is quite different from using vocational education for purposes of job training and placement.

Further, the high school can make much greater use of part-time (not necessarily half-time) work experience, with out-of-school jobs arranged for by the school, with work experience coordinated by the school and related to in-school studies. Finally, it can provide, from the middle grades through high school, a systematic study and exploration of the world of work which

will prepare all students for more realistic and satisfying career choices when the time comes for serious vocational preparation. There is a place, then, for vocational education in the high school, but education of a different kind.

The high school should concentrate on familiarizing all of its students with the nature of the world of work, the variety of its opportunities, and their own interests, aptitudes, and capacities with relation to it. This is a curriculum project of considerable magnitude in which guidance is heavily involved and it is being almost entirely neglected at the present time. The comprehensive high school is far better suited to this purpose than the area vocational school. There is a point in the educational process where students must choose different occupational pathways and separate to prepare for them, but it should be clear by now that this point is not before the completion of high school.

The pressures for separate vocational high schools are also an indication that vocational education still considers itself to be an associate, rather than a full member of the American educational enterprise, and that its leaders still believe that it has a mission which is different from the rest of the educational task. Until this view can be overcome, vocational education cannot become fully effective in the American school system. For the area vocational school, in practice, divides staff as well as students, and staff members are separated physically, intellectually, and professionally from the educational mainstream and its members. This represents a backward step in the progress of the vocational movement. ☛

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