VIEWPOINT

What About the Comprehensive High School?

SOMEWHERE in the early 1960’s, someone made the decision to redefine the comprehensive high school. Public school administrators and state and federal department vocational leaders eagerly embraced this decision as an educational breakthrough for secondary students; whereas, in reality, it may have been a hot flash from the 1920’s.

What is this decision? The decision is the area vocational school as constructed and operated apart from the comprehensive high school.

With the introduction of large amounts of federal funds for construction, equipment, and staffing in 1963, 1965, and 1968, state and federal leadership urged school systems to expand and improve their high school vocational curriculum. Monies were available to build, equip, and staff secondary area vocational facilities.

This decision offered to the public schools a seemingly low cost and economical way of expanding the secondary program of studies. The decision also meant that a new vocational power structure was created that often left secondary principals out of the decision-making role. In many cases, it meant that vocational counselors would not be housed in the high school, but serve only through the vocational facility. It also resulted in the loss of extracurricular activities for most vocationally enrolled students. Other by-products of this decision include poor building utilization of the area school facilities during the school day, and the opportunity for the reorientation of the regular high school around more academically oriented programs and activities, thus widening the division between the academic and vocational programs.

The reoccurring cost of transportation and the daily loss of student time while being transported are additional problems accompanying separate area vocational facilities over the next 40 years.

In a small sample study conducted by the Education Systems Resources Corporation for the Alabama Advisory Council on Vocational Education, it was found “... that comprehensive high schools provide lower costs per student and more effective job placement opportunities than do area secondary vocational schools.” In comparing secondary area vocational schools and comprehensive secondary schools, “... it was found that the
vocational needs of students were being served best in the comprehensive secondary schools both in terms of courses, relevance of training and training related placement.” In keeping with the above findings, the council recommended that, “Every effort should be made to develop comprehensive institutions at all levels. Purely academic institutions should inaugurate vocational programs and vocational institutions should include academic programs.”

The findings and recommendations of the Alabama Advisory Council on Vocational Education seem to agree with other vocational research throughout the United States. This leads me to suggest the following points for consideration:

1. When area vocational facilities are constructed, they should be part of an existing or planned high school. If this is not possible because of unique local circumstances, then the facility should be constructed on the campus of the most centrally located high school. Under no circumstances should the facility be located on a neutral site without a planned or existing high school.

2. The vocational director or supervisor in large systems with several vocational facilities should report through the Director of Secondary Instruction. When the facility is located at an existing school or in a small school system, the vocational director should report through the principal and perhaps serve as an assistant principal.

3. Vocational counselors and regular counselors should work together in the high school with all students.

4. When classroom space in the vocational building is not being used, academic classes can and should be scheduled into these areas.

5. When shop areas are not in use during the day, these areas should be used for orientation with younger students and enrichment programs for the college-bound student.

6. Vocational supervisors, along with high school principals, must be committed to the comprehensive high school.

—Jerry C. McGee, Assistant Superintendent, Decatur City Schools, Decatur, Alabama.