
OPINION

GUEST VIEWPOINT

BUILDING LANE COUNTY'S WORK FORCE

Make students ready for work in this information age

BY KRISTA PARENT

Estimates are that 20 percent of what we now know will be obsolete in a year. Futurist Ed Barlow says that by 2010, technical information will double every 72 hours.

The skills and knowledge our students need to compete in the future work force have changed dramatically. Many sources document that high school graduates entering the work force need the same or similar skills as students going to college. If students are unprepared for college, it is likely they are also ill-equipped for jobs that pay good wages.

In kindergarten through 12th grade, schools are preparing students for the workplace in much the same way as they are preparing students to be college-ready. It's a difficult task, considering the work force has changed significantly in just 10 years.

In an article titled "A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools," Tony Wagner, co-director of the Change Leadership Group in the Education Department at Harvard University, and his co-authors remarked that, "Our economy has transitioned from one in which most people earned their living with skilled hands to one in which all employees need to be intellectually skilled if they hope to make more than minimum wage."

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critical thinking skills, complex problem-solving skills, and the ability to work in collaborative work teams. They still need the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics. These changes affect the curriculum and the way we educate our students in Oregon.

Oregon's graduation requirements now mandate that every student has a personal Education Plan and Profile. As a component of the Education Plan and Profile, high school graduates must demonstrate career-related learning — including capabilities in personal management, problem solving, communication and teamwork, along with knowledge about the workplace and career planning and advancement.

Graduates also must collect evidence that demonstrates the application and acquisition of skills and knowledge related to their interests and post-high school goals. These plans include not only the academic courses students take during their high school career, but also a plan for experiences that relate to what they want to do when they leave high school.

Many students participate in career symposiums, career fairs, job shadow programs, work experiences and internships in order to help determine their career pathway. In most Oregon high schools, students identify a broad occupational category and tailor their required and elective courses to better prepare them for opportunities in their chosen pathway.

Students today must be proficient with technology if they are to meet the demands of the 21st century, even though we can't be certain how the world for which we are preparing students will be constituted.

Students aren't afraid of new technologies, but schools are challenged to keep up in terms of the cost of new equipment and training teachers and administrators to stay ahead of the students.

Additionally, it is difficult to identify core competencies that all students should meet in the area of technology, because the technology changes so rapidly.

Today, it is not uncommon in some districts to walk into a second-grade classroom and find students entering information into handheld computers via wireless keyboards. At the

secondary level, students are programming robotic arms, designing Web pages and developing computer games and software.

In their free time, students text-message friends, create podcasts on their iPods and develop their own Web pages.

Teachers also are making significant changes in their teaching practices. Today, standard teaching gear includes a laptop computer, projector, document camera, digital camera and more. The days when beginning teachers received just a grade book are now ancient history.

We do know that creativity and innovation are valued skills in today's workplace, especially in high-wage careers. Our curriculum is evolving to accommodate these changes in the work force.

Schools provide rigorous and relevant course work. They give students meaningful relationships in terms of mentorships and career experiences so they are adequately prepared for what follows high school.

The challenge education faces is unprecedented. We will strive to prepare all students to be "college or work force ready." There is a sense of urgency in education, because to do anything less is unacceptable.

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