



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Commissioner Tom Pauken

Press Release

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Rediscovering Vocational Education By Tom Pauken

What a difference four years makes!

When I joined the Texas Workforce Commission in 2008, I was stunned by the lack of appreciation for vocational education -- even here in Texas. State educational policy had become more of a "one size fits all" approach to education, oriented towards making every student "college-ready."

This elitist-designed educational policy, which viewed vocational education as a stepchild, had the unfortunate effect of choking off the pipeline of skilled workers both in Texas and nationally.

Four years ago, when I gave a speech in Freeport on the need for more opportunities for vocational education programs in our schools, two school superintendents in the audience came up to me afterwards and expressed surprise that someone in state government would make such a statement. In 2008, I heard whispers of discontent on this issue, but developments since then have transformed those whispers into a roar. After years of speaking out on this much needed message, I am encouraged that organizations like my friends at the Texas Association of Business and others are joining the call for effective change, giving voice to common sense Texans from every corner of the state. Finally, the voices demanding education reforms that work are reaching critical mass.

For industry groups, the shortage of skilled labor has become more acute with a greying workforce. The need to re-create a pipeline of skilled workers has become a matter of business necessity, causing trade groups to become increasingly vocal.

Parents see how we're pushing everyone to go to college. Yet four-year university tuition is skyrocketing. Students aren't majoring in high demand fields, and there is a huge disconnection between what students are studying in college and what employers want. As a result, many young people graduate college deeply in debt, while having trouble finding decent, entry level jobs. No wonder parents are frustrated!

The introduction of the STAAR testing program exacerbated the problem. Legislators were assured it would create less emphasis on standardized testing and more emphasis on career and technical education. In practice, the reverse has occurred.

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Part of the problem with STAAR is how it combines with the overly restrictive 4x4 graduation plan, which requires all students to take certain specified academic credits, which are part of the STAAR testing system. Meeting the 4x4 requirements often makes it impossible for students involved in band or athletics to enroll in career and technology programs.

Educators – who are on the front lines of our educational system – see a lot of young people dropping out of high school because they didn't see the college-preparatory curriculum as relevant to them and weren't given alternative opportunities for vocational courses. Educators hear from frustrated parents. That's why the vast majority of school districts statewide have adopted resolutions calling for less emphasis on high-stakes standardized tests.

Legislators – who are often close to the people – have been sensitive to these concerns for some time. In 2001, then-Rep. Gene Seaman (R-Corpus Christi) pushed House Bill 660, which directed local school districts to offer more vocational education programs and allowing districts to grant awards to students who complete them. Seaman's bill had 59 coauthors (out of 150 representatives), was passed unanimously in the House, and received only four no votes in the Texas Senate, but it was vetoed.

In recent months, the groundswell has become so great that even supporters of high-stakes testing and the current emphasis on pushing everyone towards college, are expressing support for more career education. Texans all across the state -- and across the political spectrum -- are coming together in a united coalition behind serious alternatives to misguided educational policy.

It is time to end this "teaching to the test" system that isn't working for either the kids interested in going on to a university or for those more oriented towards learning a skilled trade.

Let's replace it with one that focuses on real learning and opportunities for all!

Tom Pauken is the Commissioner Representing Employers of the Texas Workforce Commission and author of "Bringing America Home."

Media Contact: Lisa Givens 512-463-8556

The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.