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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Raise bar but keep it relevant

Help noncollege-bound students prepare for Michigan's work force



Michigan needs to do more to provide alternative training to prepare our students for the 21st-century work force -- regardless of their aspirations to go to college.

There's been a lot of hand-wringing recently about enhanced graduation requirements for high school students. Some fear that tough new algebra requirements in particular could worsen the state's dropout rate.

While we certainly need more college graduates, we can't focus solely on a college preparatory curriculum at the expense of students whose interests lie down different paths.

To keep students engaged and help them succeed -- and graduate -- we must make the rigorous education elements relevant so that they want to learn.

School systems in Houston are taking this approach and the results look favorable. At Carl Wunsche Sr. High, teachers are making required classes relevant, based on what students are interested in. An auto technology student featured in an article in the Houston Press said his core classes are better and more interesting because his teacher incorporates the history of the automobile into lesson plans.

Another Houston school, dubbed a "dropout factory," will open the country's first Academy for Petroleum Exploration and Production Technology in the fall. The hope is to prepare students for high-paying technical positions in the oil and gas industry and help fuel Texas' economy.

School systems all over the world are experiencing higher dropout rates today, and many are finding innovative solutions. In Finland, nearly half the 15-year-old students attend vocational

schools. Germany uses a dual education system that combines apprenticeships at a company and education at a vocational school in one course.

A blended education option has value in Michigan as the state transitions into a revitalized economy. A skilled and educated work force should be the goal.

The emphasis needs to remain on raising the bar while keeping it relevant. A 1998 University of Michigan study found that high-risk students were eight to 10 times less likely to drop out in 11th and 12th grades if they enrolled in a career and technical education program instead of a general program.

Michigan has a tremendous asset in the manufacturing base that has been the envy of the world. The problem is, we are not taking full advantage of it in making our rigorous curriculum relevant to students and the careers many of them are interested in exploring.

We should not simply force students into tracks, as was done decades ago, where some students are identified for college prep courses and others funneled toward vocational classes. Rather, we need a fundamental shift in how we view education, focusing on individual students and their needs. We need to develop and nurture a program that pushes all students to learn advanced concepts in a way that meets their varied learning styles and interests.

At hearings we're conducting around the state about the dropout crisis, we've heard many students share their excitement about programs that show them practical applications of the skills they're learning in the classroom. Organizations such as the Michigan Industrial and Technical Education Society (MITES) focus on hands-on, relevant, real-world learning -- such as tying together math and science skills with technical education in wood- and metal-working. We need to explore how organizations like MITES find solutions to meet the needs of all Michigan students.

To grow our state's economy, we must find real solutions to make our rigorous curriculum relevant for all students. Only then can we ensure Michigan has a highly skilled work force ready to compete in the 21st century.

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