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Our Children Need Vocational Education

By Senator John Cowdery

Alaska offers a high quality of life and we are optimistic about the state's future economy. At the same time we are worried about the education system, and as a recent article put it, is "suffering" from a lack of skilled workers.

The high school competency exam has sparked a lot of debate recently, and the only thing I hear people agreeing on is that our students need a complete and well-rounded education to be able to succeed in our competitive work environment. Vocational education, specialized training that creates a skilled workforce, is an important part of a complete education but is often left out of the discussion.

Many of our students are not interested in going to college to study engineering or computer programming. These are bright young people, willing to work hard, but they have no desire to spend their workdays sitting at a desk. They want jobs that use learned skills, jobs that use their hands as well as their minds, and jobs that make good money. They need vocational training opportunities at both the high school and college level to excel at the kind of careers they want.

How do I know these students exist? I know because when I was a young man in school in Missouri, I had little interest in classes that covered theorems or concepts. The classes I enjoyed were wood shop and auto mechanics, where I could learn how to build and fix things. Anxious to begin earning a living, I left school early. This is not something I recommend or condone today, but it is part of how I became the person I am.

I arrived in Alaska in 1950 and helped build Elmendorf Air Force Base and Ft. Richardson. I started a construction company in Anchorage, and ran it successfully until I retired several years ago. I used the experience I gained over the years running my own business and became a Representative to the Alaska State House. I am now in my current seat as an Alaska State Senator.

Were there times when I was running my company that I needed more education in business and accounting issues? Of course there were. When I needed to learn more on a particular subject, I took classes or read books. I took advantage of higher education as I needed it, but the foundation of my construction career was built on the skills I learned in my school shop classes.

Our state has a great need for skilled workers in many areas, including welders, miners, drillers, electricians, truck drivers and heavy equipment operators. One of the State of Alaska's top

priorities is the Natural Gas Pipeline. Where are we going to find the skilled labor for this project?

The health care industry also relies on skilled technicians to help doctors and nurses provide patient care. Respiratory therapists, physical therapists, radiology technicians and physician's assistants are some of the highly skilled people that must be imported from Outside to fill job vacancies in the state.

The Galena School District sees the importance of vocational education to our state, and has made great strides toward creating a comprehensive program. They have established successful partnerships with General Motors/Suzuki, UAA and UAF to provide vocational education for both high school students and adults. The small engine repair, culinary arts and cosmetology programs are some of the classes that are already in place, and the large engine repair and machining classes will start next year.

The State of Alaska offers only one full-scale vocational technology center (in Seward) to our students who wish to become highly skilled and trained workers. Although it provides the necessary programs for students to prepare for the every day work world, it is limited in space and housing, thus depriving many, a golden opportunity to be successful. Likewise, the Anchorage School District's King Career Center offers many of the same type of programs. However, the need for skill training should begin within the school districts---at the middle school level.

And while I commend and appreciate the Department of Corrections for offering such programs as: oilfield safety, horticulture, hazardous materials and computer software classes, to rehabilitate prisoners, I am often bewildered and infuriated, just how this so-called "horn of plenty" cannot provide more vocational training for our students.

It is time to start thinking about the specialized workers that will be in high demand in the very near future. We need to expand our vocational training programs and create new ones to provide the skills necessary to create a strong workplace. It is important for our students' economic futures, and to the future of our state.