



Joe Graba, Former head of Minnesota Technical College System and founding partner of Education|Evolving

Employers key in changing bias against career-technical education

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

April 24, 2015

Present

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Summary

With a 50-year-plus career in almost all aspects of Minnesota education, Education|Evolving's **Joe Graba** discusses the challenge of improving career technical education (CTE) as a key component of improving education overall. In particular, he suggests that cultural bias favoring academic education over career technical education is getting in the way of assuring an adequately trained workforce in Minnesota. Because of their need for a dependable supply of qualified workers, employers must play a key role in changing such cultural bias. They must help students and parents appreciate technical education's advantages in salary potential, abundant job opportunities, and savings in training time and tuition.

Graba contends it is unrealistic to expect that significant educational improvement can occur without changes in delivery systems of education. Improvements are more likely via significant disruptions in traditional education. One helpful disruption, he suggested, is to upgrade the teachers' role from that of being too closely directed by government regulation and school administrators to being more autonomous and fully in charge of the education process.

Biography

Joe Graba was the founding head of Minnesota's Technical College System. Graba began his career as a science teacher in 1961. He served as vice president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers. He was a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives for three terms where he chaired the Education Finance Committee.

Graba was Deputy Commissioner of Education for Minnesota in the late 1970s. During most of the 1980s Graba was the head of Minnesota's Technical College System. From 1990 to 1995, Graba was the deputy executive director and then executive director of the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board. Graba finished his fulltime career as dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University. He is a founding partner of Education|Evolving, an education policy think tank located in St. Paul.

Background

Today's meeting is a follow-up to recent Civic Caucus statements on human capital: [one in September 2014](#) laying out the human capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and [a follow-up paper in January 2015](#) offering recommendations for maintaining a high quality workforce in Minnesota.

Discussion

Local school districts led early development of career technical education. Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul (1898-1976), a predecessor to today's St. Paul College, and Vocational High School in Minneapolis (with roots going back to 1910), a predecessor to today's Minneapolis Community and Technical College, are among the earliest examples of leadership by local school districts in career-technical education (earlier known as vocational-technical education). A major federal act in 1917 (Smith-Hughes) provided vocational education funds to school districts across the nation, stimulating school districts to offer various vocational education classes.

In 1945 the Minnesota Legislature authorized area vocational-technical schools that could be set up at the initiative of local school districts. According to a history prepared by the Minnesota Department of Education "...the schools, which granted no degrees, were meant to fill the need of those who needed preparation for jobs in agriculture, home economics, health, office, distributive, trade and industrial, and technical occupations. The education is generally post high school in nature". High school graduates and undergraduates could attend tuition-free to 21 years of age. Some 33 such schools had been established before they all were transferred to a separate board for vocational-technical education in 1983. State commissioners of education such as Erling Johnson and Howard Casmey were instrumental in leadership, Graba said.

Famous national report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 led to more academic emphasis. A diminished interest in vocational education relative to academic education took place in the wake of the national report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, Graba said. He said he could sense waning support for vocational education when attending national meetings of state vocational organizations. He could see groundswell in favor of academic versus vocational education by educators and the larger public.

Students wanted to attend "college", not "vocational schools". State legislators felt pressure, he said, from families where students and parents didn't like the idea of some students going to "college" and others *only* to "technical institutes" or "vocational schools." The Legislature renamed all technical institutes as "technical colleges" on July 1, 1989. In 1991 the Legislature passed a law—effective July 1, 1995—removing the technical colleges from local school districts and merging the technical colleges, the state's community colleges, and state universities into the current Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system.

High school vocational classes fell victim to greater academic emphasis. Graba said that in the 1980s the University of Minnesota began requiring high school foreign language as a condition for admissions. Not wanting their students to be ineligible to apply to the University of Minnesota, school superintendents found it essential to remove some vocational classes in favor of foreign language, he said. The negative feeling toward vocational education continued into the 1990s.

A turnaround from a negative attitude toward career-technical education (CTE) is likely to take many years. While welcoming an apparent growing interest today in CTE, Graba said he is pessimistic about change occurring quickly. Things change very slowly in education, and it's difficult to envision any quick changes in governing structures or funding streams, he said.

Might changes in job and career opportunities have occurred faster than CTE could respond? An interviewer noted that over the last 20-plus years we've seen many new types of jobs develop, particularly in technology, and many other types of jobs diminish in importance. Perhaps, the interviewer suggested, CTE hasn't been able to keep pace with the rapidity of change.

While agreeing with rapidity of change, Graba highlighted what he considers to be a good response in training to meet changes in printing technology, an area of significant strength in the Twin Cities area economy. One example he offered on rapidity of change is the field of auto mechanics where mechanics formerly were fixing broken parts, while today the emphasis is on diagnosis and replacement of parts, not fixing them.

Government and educators need to be responsive to end-users, the employers.

Government and educators now are more comfortable in the academic area, designing programs, Graba said. CTE needs to be driven by the changing need of the end-users, the employers, not the educators. It can't be done from the top. Asked about recent publicity about conflict in MnSCU, Graba said he wonders whether disagreements might be partly related to top leadership trying to elevate the importance of CTE but encountering opposition among more academic-oriented faculty.

"Everyone wants education to do better, but without changing how education is delivered." A fundamental difficulty with improving education at all levels is refusal to acknowledge that improvement won't occur without change in structure, Graba said. To illustrate the type of change he believes is needed, Graba referred to a major position taken by Education|Evolving, a think-tank with which he is a founding partner.

Education|Evolving argues strongly for giving power to the educators most intimately involved with the students, namely, the teachers, he said. Today one might characterize the predominant education structure as resembling a pyramid, with the federal government at the top, followed by several levels, in declining importance: governors, legislators, state school officers, school boards,

superintendents, principals, and lastly, at the bottom, teachers. Teachers are assigned the most responsibility and the least amount of authority. Education|Evolving would turn the pyramid upside-down, so the teachers themselves would be in charge, with accountability and authority, and with less expectation for uniformity among schools.

Urgent need to overcome a strong cultural bias against CTE. An interviewer noted a significant need in Minnesota to assure an adequate *supply* of trained workers to satisfy employers' *demand*. For the supply-demand chain to work, the significant economic advantages for students who pursue CTE must be stressed. The interviewer wondered what leverage might be utilized to combat cultural bias against CTE, thereby enabling schools to better serve students.

Graba replied that more parents, employers, and students need to accept the fact that a four-year college degree offers no guarantee of a living wage job. A widespread cultural attitude since the 1980s that everyone should go to college for a four-year degree is sadly misplaced, Graba said.

An inevitable complicating factor, he said, is that virtually all high school student advisors, counselors and teachers themselves hold at least bachelor's degrees. It is questionable whether many of them would suggest options that are less than the education they received.

Graba said he sadly recalls that while serving as state director of technical colleges he was forced to discontinue a diesel mechanics course at a technical college for lack of enrollment. He then was strongly criticized by an implement dealer who had openings for trained mechanics. Graba had to reply that not enough students were choosing such a career, despite immediate job opportunities. He couldn't afford to operate programs without students.

Employers' role in training might be overlooked. An interviewer noted that many people might be unaware that companies such as Stratasys, dealing in high-tech machines requiring trained personnel, have found a successful niche in training customers' employees to operate such equipment. Graba replied that many high-tech companies are too small to provide such training and, therefore, rely upon the contribution of the technical colleges and other education institutions.

Should more attention be given to emulating European counterparts? An interviewer noted that employers in European countries such as Switzerland have done a much better job of taking leadership in training employees. He cited Bühler, Inc., with a major presence in Minnesota. (See Civic Caucus Bühler interview [here](#).)

Obstacles to accomplishing disruptive change. An interviewer who is close to a large education institution in Minnesota said even though the institution's board and top administration want change, nothing happens without buy-in from department heads and deans. But, he said, change is thwarted because department heads and deans often have their own agendas, such as maintaining the status quo, or they do not see their role as implementing policy from above.

Another interviewer reminded the group of the session the Civic Caucus held recently with leaders of Genesys Works, which illustrated the success of unconventional approaches to help interest youth in technical careers. (See Civic Caucus Genesys interview [here](#).)

Disruptive approaches needed: start something new, separate from the current system. Graba suggested that because trying to change education head-on is futile, it is better to try building the new outside the traditional system.

Efforts to improve education so far have emphasized chiefly moving responsibility up to the next highest level, Graba said. In the 1950s, the big effort was school consolidation, moving education from the local school to the local school district and combining districts. In the 1960s, power moved from the local school district to the state departments of education; in the 1970s and 1980s to governors and legislatures, and in the 1990s to the federal government. Now students and teachers are at the bottom of the pile, so to speak, he said.

Without trying to reform the system directly, Graba suggested new "disruptive" choices need to be offered, which is why the consulting group with which he is affiliated, Education|Evolving, is promoting schools where teachers are making the decisions and being held accountable for those decisions.

To illustrate a problem not addressed by the existing system but taken up by others, Graba recalled his unsuccessful efforts while head of the now-defunct Higher Education Coordinating Board to get colleges interested in taking advantage of new technology, including online learning. No one was interested, he said. But outside the existing system new online schools such as Capella and Walden have attracted thousands of students.

Another example he cited are the thousands of residents of Minneapolis who have opted to send their children elsewhere, via open enrollment or charter schools. He believes great things would happen if individual schools and their teachers were given freedom to educate as they deem best. Graba recalled that at least a dozen teacher-led schools in Milwaukee were set up with the support of a sympathetic superintendent. Later half of them were returned to central office control when a new superintendent was hired.

Employers must lead if the CTE system is to be turned around. If CTE is really going to succeed at the high school and post-high school level in Minnesota, leadership by employers is essential, Graba said. They are the end users of students trained in CTE. They must point out the need and the outcomes if the need is fulfilled and the consequences if it is not.