



Mark Schmitz, Superintendent, Staples-Motley School District

Is career-technical education more effectively introduced at the high school level?

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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Present

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Summary

Mark Schmitz, superintendent, Staples-Motley Public Schools, discusses an expansion in career-technical education in Staples-Motley made possible by a new voter-approved property tax. Career-technical education is easier for students to accomplish at the high school level than at a state technical college, he says, because at the technical college level tightly-prescribed programs for specific career training usually extends far beyond a nine-month school year. Another motivating factor for the school district's offering such courses is that there's much less bureaucracy locally at the district level than with a state institution. But an even more compelling reason, he believes, is that students simply need much earlier exposure to career opportunities and shouldn't have to wait until after high-school graduation to have that exposure.

Biography

Mark Schmitz, superintendent, Staples-Motley Public Schools, began his career by teaching third grade in Honduras with his wife, who taught first grade across the plywood hall in an abandoned warehouse. They returned to the United States where Schmitz taught sixth grade for six years in South Dakota and Minnesota. After teaching, he served as a principal for six years at Waseca Public Schools.

During the past nine years as superintendent, he helped create Connections High School and a Jump Start Kindergarten program, saw a referendum approved by school-district voters to develop a comprehensive career and technical education program for the district, and was selected by the Commissioner of Education to become a summer fellow at Vanderbilt University.

Schmitz has a bachelor's degree from St. Cloud State University and a sixth year certificate in educational leadership and administration from Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Background

The Civic Caucus has been learning about career and technical education as it relates to maintaining Minnesota's high quality workforce in coming years. Of growing interest is the extent of technical education in high schools.

Discussion

Staples-Motley is a school district in central Minnesota. **Located about one hour northwest of St. Cloud, the district serves about 1,200 students in E-12. It encompasses about 480 square miles, including the cities of Staples and Motley. Family income levels in the area result in about 50 percent of students being eligible for reduced or free lunch.**

One of two campuses of Central Lakes College, part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system, is located in Staples. The other campus is in Brainerd. The Staples campus includes career technical programs in heavy equipment operation and maintenance and in agriculture.

The city of Staples has a long history as a railroad center, with connections both to Duluth and the Twin Cities. A large wheelhouse serving steam engines in Staples was a reason for the 3M Company's locating a machine shop there. The city of Motley is known for Morey's Fish and Seafood and Trident Seafoods, which together employ about 600 people. The largest employer in the school district is the Lakewood Health System hospital in Staples, with about 800 employees. The area has a growing elderly population.

There is a strong community interest in career-technical education. The Staples-Motley school district has long had an interest in career-technical education, Schmitz said. Years ago, it operated an area vocational technical school, when such institutions were under the control of the local school boards. Subsequently, the state took over the area vocational technical schools, and since 1995 they have been merged with community colleges under the MnSCU system.

The long-term Staples-Motley interest in career-technical education became abundantly clear in 2010 when the school district held community-wide input sessions. What was revealed in those sessions, Schmitz said, was broad support for rebuilding the community's career-technical education, to start in middle school and continue through high school.

A special tax increase was approved. As a result of the input sessions the Staples-Motley school board decided to submit two questions to voters, (1) whether to continue an existing special property tax for operations, and (2) whether to add a second property tax, dedicated to career-technical

education. Both measures passed in the fall of 2013, with the career-technical tax receiving a 70 percent positive vote. That dedicated tax now raises \$250,000 a year for career-technical education in the Staples-Motley district.

Schmitz explained what has become possible now as a result of the special career-technical education tax. "At the high school we have begun offering accounting, graphic art design, technical math, computer assisted design, coding and welding. At the middle level we have added exploratory short courses in web design, graphic design, model building, bridge building, information investigation, clothing design, Project Wild (wildlife focused), landscape design, Boone and Crocket (hunting related), exploring agriculture and forestry, Explore Minnesota, catapult construction, sewing, child development and services, introduction to carpentry, creative podcasting, creative engineering and introduction to robotics. For next year and beyond we are looking at creating science-technology-engineering-math (STEM) labs for our middle and high school. We are at the exploratory stage as to which types of lab equipment would be best for our students."

It is not easy for high school students to take career-technical courses at Central Lakes

College. Responding to a question, Schmitz said that high school students can take classes tuition free at Central Lakes College under the state's Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) law. But it is difficult for high school students to take career-technical courses at the college. The reason is that a typical career-technical course is highly structured toward a person's receiving certification for a specific job, such as welding. Such courses usually don't fit well in a high school student's typical schedule and may be too specific to one type of job. For that reason, the high school career-technical courses, while certainly occupationally oriented, are directed more to learning tasks that could be applied in a number of occupations.

PSEO is more oriented to academic courses. Schmitz said that it's more likely that high school students enrolling at Central Lakes College via PSEO will take academic rather than career-technical classes. However, it's difficult for Staples-Motley students to take academic classes at Central Lakes because such classes are offered mainly at Central Lakes' other campus in Brainerd, which is 29 miles away.

The school district experiences a financial disadvantage because of PSEO. Schmitz characterized PSEO as a double-edged sword for the school district. The school district works hard for, and gains financially from, every student it enrolls. On the one hand it's very healthy for high school students to be able to enroll in college-level courses for credit and not have to pay tuition. However, the school district loses financially because even though its direct classroom expenses may decline when students leave to take PSEO, its overhead expenses continue at the same, very substantial level.

It's important to expose students early to local opportunities for education and work. It's not unusual, Schmitz said, for students to think that they will need to go elsewhere for jobs after graduation. Consequently, the district takes special steps to acquaint students with education and business opportunities in the area. In 2013, the entire sophomore class of Staples-Motley High School toured Central Lakes College's Staples campus and students were given time to question instructors and students at the campus. Schmitz said the tour exposed sophomores to new technology requirements for today's workforce. Earlier this month 60 Staples-Motley students from the class of

2015 toured Staples businesses, including Staples Precision Metalcraft, 3M, and McKecknie Tool, and the heavy equipment training program at Central Lakes.

Next month Staples 10th and 11th graders will attend a Career Exploration Day in Brainerd that showcases more than 150 regional high-demand careers with hands-on demonstrations, simulators and breakout sessions. That event is sponsored by Bridges Career Academies and Workplace Connections, a program co-sponsored by Central Lakes College and the Brainerd Area Chamber of Commerce.

Schmitz briefly described another program, **Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities** (CEO), which encourages learning about local businesses and encourages talented high school youth to develop their own business ideas within the community. Students work with local business mentors, create their own business plans and present their ideas to local banking investors and business owners.

Local initiative on career-technical education is important. In continuing discussion about respective roles of the local school district and state-run technical colleges, Schmitz said that it's a lot easier to get programs established at the local level because there's much less bureaucracy than with a state entity.

School counselors are "gate-keepers". A questioner, noting the success of an apprenticeship program in Albert Lea high school, inquired about the importance of school counselors. Schmitz replied that counselors really serve as the "gate-keepers" in advising students about future education and work opportunities. However, he added, schools have far too few counselors.

Is compulsory school attendance to age 17 wrong-headed? A questioner noted that the Minnesota Legislature only recently increased compulsory school attendance to age 17 and that some people think the age should be increased to 18. The questioner inquired whether such efforts are going exactly in the wrong direction, on the mistaken assumption that it's beneficial to require attendance even if students don't want to be there. If students weren't required to remain in school after, say, reaching the age of 16, maybe they'd be more likely to pursue a route such as career-technical education, he suggested. Schmitz replied that the bigger issue is getting students to start figuring out earlier what career area they would like to pursue. Another questioner commented that too many students have no idea of the benefit of courses they are taking unless some effort is made to tie the course material to real-world applications.

A questioner highlighted the success of Kipp Academies, a national network of public schools that help students from educationally underserved communities develop knowledge, skills, character and habits needed to succeed in college and in the competitive world beyond. The culture of Kipp, the questioner said, is to get every student thinking very early, and always, about why he or she is in school.

Bringing the supply (of trained workers) in line with employer demand (for trained talent). An interviewer commented that the biggest challenge we've come across in our interviews on the workforce is identifying the keys to ensuring that people have the appropriate training for the jobs that will be available. Schmitz replied that such a challenge, in the hockey lingo of Wayne Gretzky, is to know where the puck will be, not where it is now. So we need to look ahead to the kind of training that will be needed for tomorrow's jobs. In the 1990s we were told that many manufacturing and service

jobs would be outsourced to other countries, so we lowered our expectations for the need for technical training here in the U.S. Now we're learning that outsourcing isn't as great a threat as expected. We now need to emphasize more technical training. But that means more emphasis on associate and two-year degrees and less emphasis on four-year degrees.

How does change happen? An interviewer said that a key issue is how change of any real significance can be made to occur. So in the case of workforce adequacy, how does a really significant change occur in our process of matching up qualified job-seekers with jobs that are available? Those participating in the system as it now exists, the questioner said, can only go so far in advocating for change before hitting barriers.

Schmitz replied by describing **Connections High School**, in effect, an alternative high school option run by the Staples-Motley School District. Housed in Staples High School, the Connections school emphasizes career and technical education and is the only school in the area focusing on project-based learning. Guiding principles of Connections High School include:

1. Project-based learning is the framework: "Do. Apply. Reflect."
2. Learning happens in a multi-grade, 9th-to-12th-grade classroom with daily advisories.
3. Learning is grounded in core standards in math, science and language arts.
4. Academic skills are integrated with basic work skills: attendance, positive attitude, cooperation, initiative and communication skills.
5. Students are responsible for their learning; adults serve as facilitators.
6. Students learn without limits and across disciplines within and outside of the school building.
7. Students plan and set goals for the present and future.
8. Students serve others and the community.

Connections High School has both full and part-time staff and a governing board that meets monthly. It is located in one wing of Staples Motley High School. Connections students can enroll for up to two electives (not including career and technical classes) at Staples Motley High School and can participate in all extracurricular activities and events there. Currently 17 students are enrolled in Connections.

Political support varies for innovation in schools. Asked about political support for change, Schmitz said it varies. Sometimes you find good support in the state Department of Education and in the Governor and Legislature. At other times, support wanes.