



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
Terry Holliday



July 17, 2015

College and Career Readiness – Part 2

Over the last few weeks, I have been spending a significant amount of time meeting with other states and presenting at national conferences on issues related to accountability and career and technical education.

In the past year, several very important reports have focused on career and technical education. The Council of Chief State School Officers published a report titled [Opportunities and Options: Making Career Preparation Work for Students](#) and the Southern Regional Education Board recently released [Credentials for All: An Imperative for SREB States](#). The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has published a report addressing the talent management pipeline and the National Governor's Association has a major initiative with states that tackles the same issue.

A common theme among all the reports is that we must change the national conversation concerning career and technical education and one of the strategies that can help is to elevate and integrate career and technical education within a state accountability system.

With the passage of Senate Bill 1 in 2009, Kentucky had a clear mission to develop an accountability system that focused on the academic preparedness of high school graduates for entry-level courses at the postsecondary level. As we were developing the accountability model in late 2009 and 2010, every stakeholder group asked us also to address career readiness. One of our first steps was to come up with a clear definition of what that meant.

Career Ready: *the level of preparation (core academic skills, employability skills and technical, job-specific skills) a high school graduate needs in order to proceed to the next step in a chosen career, whether that is postsecondary coursework, industry certification, or entry into the military or workforce.*

Once we came to a consensus on how to define career readiness, it was critical that we have measures to gauge how well our students were doing in the areas that it encompasses – core academic skills, employability skills and technical, job-specific skills.

With the ACT already in place, we had a measure of core academic skills. It is clear that most jobs that pay a living wage will require reading and math skills that are commensurate with college-ready academic preparedness. A national organization has completed Lexile studies that show the reading level for jobs in most career-related areas require similar reading levels to college freshmen textbooks.

While the ACT provided the basic screen for academic readiness, Kentucky higher education provided tremendous support for Compass and other college placement tests (KYOTE), so that students had an opportunity to become academically ready during their senior year if they failed to do so on the ACT during their junior year.

Additionally, working closely with the business community, Kentucky was able to determine that the WorkKeys silver, gold and platinum levels were excellent predictors of academic readiness and some employability skills.

Kentucky worked with the military community to identify the appropriate level on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) that clearly established a potential military candidate had the academic skills needed to enter a military career path, which equated to a private career path and a job that pays a living wage.

The technical and job-specific skills are more wide ranging than the academic readiness. These skills require career pathway-specific measures. Students in Kentucky can gain technical readiness through the completion of a set of career and technical courses that are aligned to career pathways. Additionally, students are required to exhibit an appropriate level of employability and technical skills through either the Kentucky occupational assessments (KOSSA) and/or an approved industry-recognized certificate.

What we were able to do in Kentucky is to incentivize career and technical education by awarding accountability points for both college readiness and career readiness. In doing so, we elevated career and technical education to an equal status. The key for the future will be that we no longer talk about college- and career-readiness as separate issues. Educators should talk about students becoming “life ready.”

Educators also should focus on the concept that there are no dead ends in education. A student may choose a career pathway and enter the workforce after gaining a one year technical certification and industry certification or a student may choose to enter the work force after a two-year or four-year degree. Either way, students should always be encouraged to return to education to gain additional and stackable credentials.

Countries like Switzerland, Germany and Singapore have recognized the need to elevate and integrate career and technical education and their economies show the wisdom of this national focus. Kentucky has been at the forefront of this work in the U.S. and I anticipate that in the next 3-5 years we will see many more states move in a similar direction.

Creating the workforce of the future should be one of our primary goals of education. This does not run counter to the goal of creating an adult with a passion and commitment to lifelong learning. College- and career-readiness are two concepts go hand in hand since both ensure success for children and our nation.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education