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THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

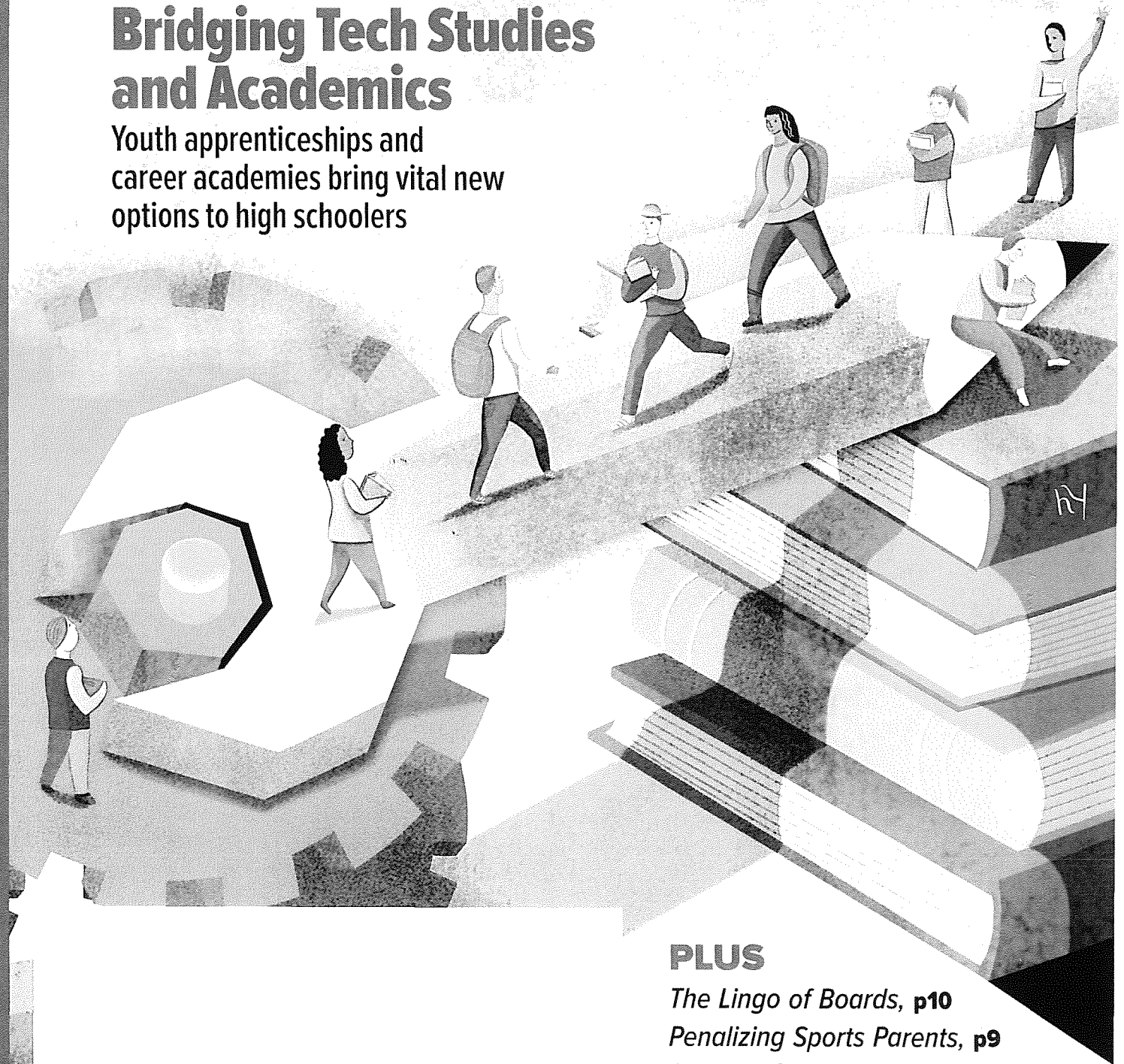
# School Administrator

APRIL 2015

ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS AND COMMENTARY FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS

## Bridging Tech Studies and Academics

Youth apprenticeships and  
career academies bring vital new  
options to high schoolers



### PLUS

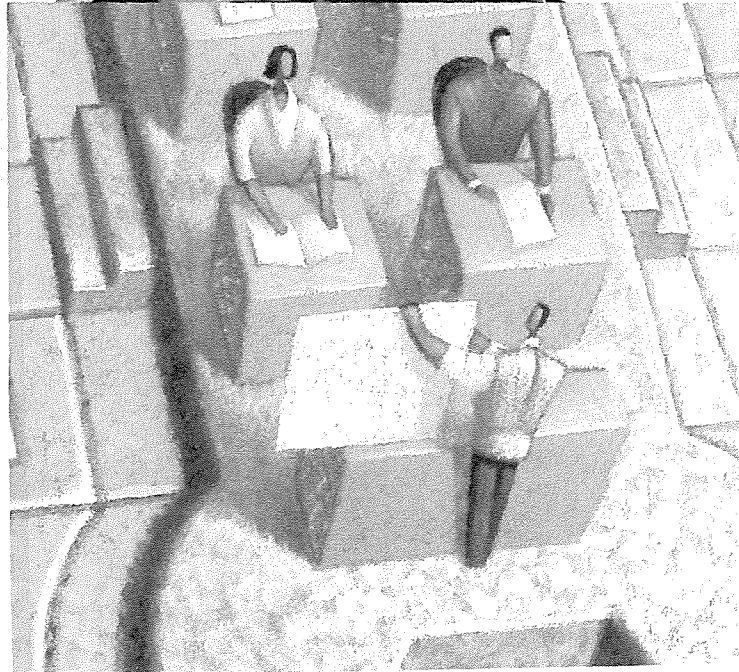
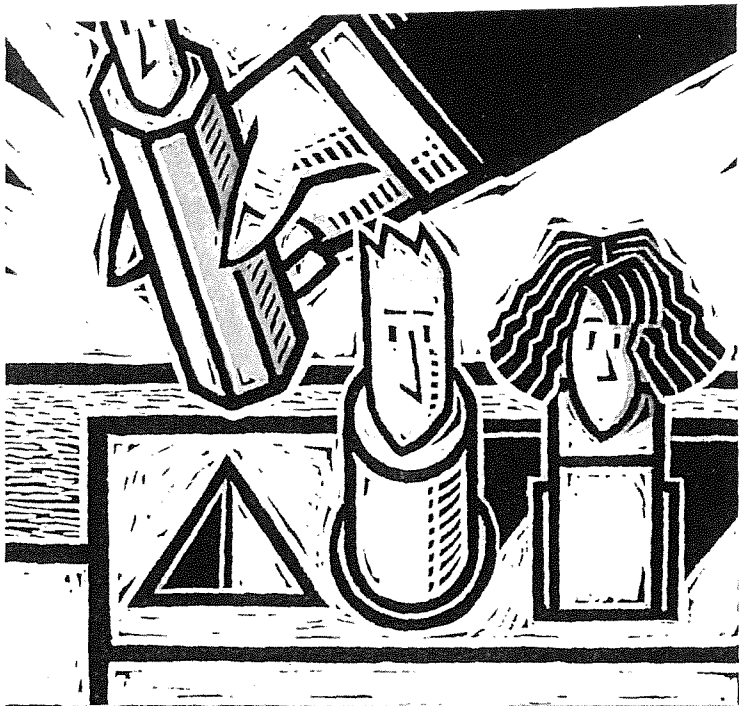
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# School

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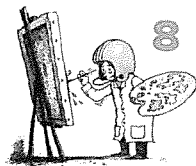
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- ▶ *I Got Schooled: The Unlikely Story of How a Moonlighting Movie Maker Learned the Five Keys to Closing America’s Education Gap*

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# Career Skills vs. Academics: Not an Either/Or Proposition

A Massachusetts district helps all students discover where they belong in high school and beyond

BY EDWARD A. BOUQUILLON



When students graduate from my high school, I want them to be able to answer two key questions: What do I do well? And what do I love to do?

At Minuteman High School, in a sweeping 16-town district west of Boston, we offer career and technical education in 19 majors, ranging from carpentry and cosmetology to biotechnology and engineering technology. We couple that with rigorous academic instruction, including Advanced Placement courses.

We might ask this pair of questions in slightly different ways, and we might get different answers from the same student a year or two into their high school education — but those are the fundamental questions we focus on at Minuteman and in career and technical education, or CTE.

After 20-plus years as a school administrator, I am convinced that they're the right questions, and we would all benefit if more schools asked them.

## The Case for CTE

Bringing more high-quality career and technical education into American high schools could help students make better decisions about their futures — and better decisions for our nation and its economy.

Career and technical education has

advanced tremendously in the last few years as a result of high-stakes testing, changes in the global economy and the shifting job market.

While CTE may not be the answer for all students, I think almost all of us would agree that a more vigorous focus on career awareness and career development would be welcomed by students and families.

The crush of college debt on young people, many of whom can't find work after they leave college, is a serious drain on households and the economy. And as Harvard University's Pathways to Prosperity Project found, far too many high school graduates who get into college are leaving without a degree.

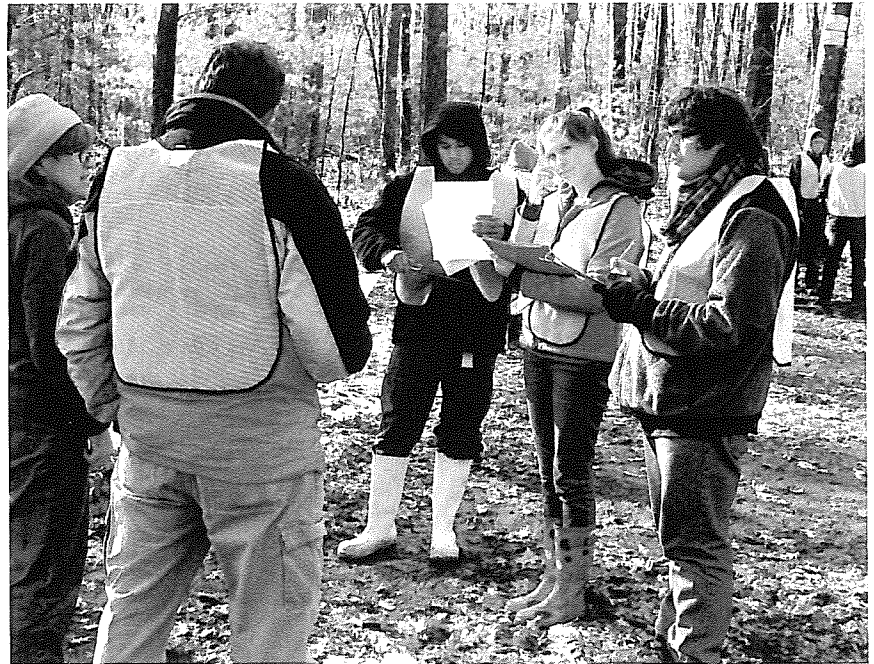
Debating whether schools should focus on *either* career skills *or* academics is ridiculous. It isn't an either/or proposition. A high school education must include both, and the result must resonate for the student in a personal way.

### Purpose and Joy

Academic instruction is a major part of a CTE student's preparation. Why? Employers want to hire employees who have a strong grounding in English, math, science and technology. These skills are necessary for success in today's ultracompetitive labor market. It is absolutely essential for those who switch careers later on.

What employers want in addition to technical skills are employees who are satisfied in their jobs. People are naturally happy and productive when the job fits not just their skill set, but connects to what motivates them internally. Through CTE, students can learn to recognize their abilities, aptitudes and interests and work toward a profession that gives them purpose and joy.

Career and technical education is ideal for young men and women who are open to learning about themselves and the world around them. These are students who seek a robust high



Students in the Environmental Science and Technology program at Minuteman Career and Technical High School in Lexington, Mass., are helping to conduct an environmental site assessment project in a neighboring town along with the land owner and their teacher.

school experience that gives them a firm foundation in challenging academics, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, professional training and team problem solving. Directly connecting these academic and occupational skills to what a student is passionate about is the secret to engaging students in their learning. They are challenged, tested and gratified as never before.

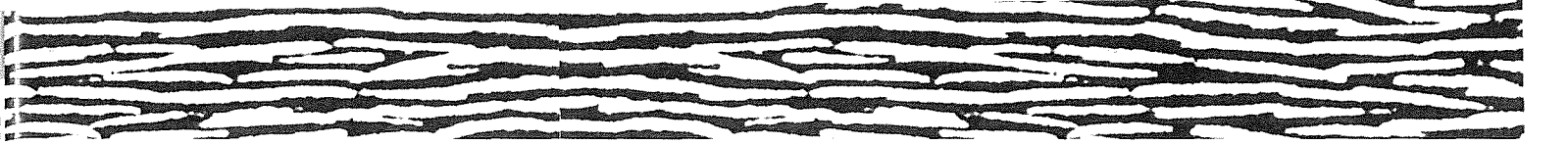
### Articulating Experience

When I speak to potential students and to their families, I promise that Minuteman will help them answer these two fundamental questions: What do I love to do? What do I do well? The questions are simple, yet they are the basis for lifelong learning and a successful college and career experience. When a school is committed to helping the student answer them, educators engage the student and act as a profound influence in guiding the student's choices.

These questions require a young person to reflect in a way that recognizes the value of their own experience. It is a respectful question that connects — in a singularly powerful way — a student's internal thinking about themselves to their school.

At Minuteman, we assume that what students are able to describe about what they love to do is meaningful. Within it are the keys to unlock information that leads to effective decision making about a student's CTE program choices. Getting young people to talk about what they love to do is easy, and many are willing to share.

With some students, asking what they do well requires a bit more coaching because their life experience is relatively brief. They may not have had opportunities that tested them in obvious ways. But asking them about what sports they may have played, if they built something, researched a project, wrote a song, planned a trip, raised money for a charity, created an



opportunity, had an idea that worked or wrote an e-mail that was well received are simple cues that can trigger reminders about something they did well.

When students can describe in a sentence or two an experience when they knew they were doing something well and loved doing it, we have helped them identify what we define as an achievement. Some students are reluctant to accept that “building a tree fort” or “designing a tapestry” or “planning a fundraiser” are really achievements.

The idea runs directly counter to everything they have heard — from parents, middle school guidance counselors or their teachers. For too many young learners, their grade point average, their SAT score, their high-stakes testing marks, their class rank and their college acceptance letter are the accepted measures of achievement in school. Certainly these measures are important, but they don’t provide our students with meaningful awareness of who they are and what they ought to consider in their life choices. Knowing what you do well and love to do is powerful.

### Career Exploration

Then we ask each student a follow-up question: What was most satisfying about that for you? This question is revealing in its ability to bring more motivated abilities to the surface. In speaking with students, we listen for key phrases or words that connote action, such as “I organized my friends to,” “I wrote a report that,” “I designed,” “I used my laptop to,” “I convinced my school to,” “I taught myself” and so on. These statements help us connect the students to one of the CTE programs that best fits them by looking at the specific environment in which the program operates and how it matches the natural inclinations described.

A lot goes into learning how to listen to students and assist them in

discovering what they find most satisfying. Counselors and teachers should be familiar with simple interest inventories, learning style assessments and online career exploratory applications. All these can provide data that can be used to revisit the questions that all students need to answer.

At Minuteman, all incoming freshmen participate in a half-year career exploratory program that gives them the opportunity to investigate each of the career pathways we offer. Through this experience, students develop an appreciation of the world of work, they get a sense of what fits them, and they often discover what’s not a good fit. How much better to find that out while you’re still in high school rather than when you’re in college spending thousands of dollars!

Minuteman graduates are accepted into the nation’s prominent colleges and universities, including Tufts, MIT and other top-tier schools. They excel because they are highly focused, prepared, motivated and already accustomed to the rigors of a challenging education.

We emphasize the difference between a career and a job. A career provides growth, demanding challenges and choices, upward profes-

sional and economic mobility and potentially impressive earning power.

### Desperate for Answers

As a parent and as a long-time educator, I am concerned about our young people. Far too many are like nomads, wandering in a vast uncharted desert, unsure of where to go, what to do and how to locate food, water and shelter. I see too many of them returning to their parents’ homes, bouncing from one job to another or transferring from one college to another, desperately seeking answers to fundamental questions that should have been posed — and answered by them — years before.

American high schools need to take an honest look at what we are here for and how we can prepare our young people for satisfying lives in college and in their careers.

I believe being able to answer two simple questions is the foundation for our students’ achievement of individual economic opportunity. My hope is that all schools will begin to ask them. ■

**EDWARD BOUQUILLON** is superintendent of Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical School District in Lexington, Mass. E-mail: e.bouquillon@minuteman.org. Twitter: @DrBMMHS

## Additional Resources

The author suggests these resources that relate to his article:

- ▶ *Managing Yourself, Managing Others* by Steven M. Darter, SIMA International, Cheshire, Conn.
- ▶ “The Promise of High-Quality Career and Technical Education: Improving Outcomes for Students, Firms, and the Economy” by Harry J. Holzer, Dane Linn and Wanda Montney, The College Board and The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy. [http://bit.ly/georgetown\\_career\\_and\\_tech\\_education\\_report](http://bit.ly/georgetown_career_and_tech_education_report)
- ▶ “The Changing Face of Career and Technical Education Part II” by Michael F. Fitzpatrick, Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical School District, Upton, Mass.
- ▶ “Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century” by William C. Symonds, Robert Schwartz and Ronald F. Ferguson, Pathways to Prosperity Project, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Mass., [http://bit.ly/pathways\\_to\\_prosperity](http://bit.ly/pathways_to_prosperity)