

Cambridge Day

We've failed our vocational/tech students. Here's how to fix district's broken system.

By [Alfred B. Fantini](#)

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State law promotes the policy of encouraging vocational technical education and gives students the ability to pursue the subject area of his/her choice. There are 44 approved tech education options from which Massachusetts students can choose, and Cambridge offers 11 of them at the Rindge School of Technical Arts within Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. But it also means Cambridge students should, and currently do not, have access to as many as 33 other programs, including plumbing and electrical curricula. At a time when Cambridge is booming with major construction, we might be very concerned that our local graduates or residents would not have the opportunity to train for and ultimately be among the plumbers and electricians who build the essential infrastructures of new buildings.

OPINION

Before May 2003, our elementary school graduates could enroll in any public vocational school that offered programs not available at Rindge School of Technical Arts. Then the School Committee, on the recommendation of the school superintendent, opted to join the Shore Occupational Learning and Vocational Educational Division collaborative, an academic consortium of five communities: Cambridge, Medford, Somerville, Waltham and most recently Boston. This collaborative limited choices for Cambridge students to only those associated with SOLVED and only “on a space-available basis; in all cases, local resident students have access priority over non-resident students” and further are enrolled starting at grade 10.

Because SOLVED is an educational collaborative, there are very limited costs for member communities to bear, representing considerable savings and far less than sending children to fee-driven vocational schools. Many on the School Committee at the time went along with the recommendation in the hopes it would serve as an incentive to grow internally, which we did – from five to 11 programs – while, at the same time, cutting costs for out-of-district enrollees. At the time we were blessed with a dynamic leader who increased our programs and with an energized and gifted staff that made things happen. His tenure lasted less than five years.

Fast forward to today. Most eighth-graders have no idea that the collaborative exists, because the effort to communicate this effectively is poor. Only a handful of children take advantage of the collaborative offerings, where few spaces exist for non-residents. This suggests to me that the dependence on the collaborative serves only as a blocking mechanism to prevent children from going to other non-SOLVED communities. It is a cost-saving strategy, but does it do the best for our children?



Students Nicolas Finn Bambe, Daniel Jackson Moore-Otto and Mikayla Duncan of the RSTA BE-IT Exploratory Program welcome Emily Calandrelli, second from left, host and co-producer of Fox Television’s “Xploration Outer Space” last year. (Photo: Rindge School of Technical Arts)

I was motivated to reflect on this issue because of two recent events. First, we recently added Madison Park Technical Vocational School in Boston as one of our collaborative partners. Given the recent [negative publicity and enormous problems plaguing that school](#), it was unthinkable that we would, at this time, include them as a partner. Second, I was deeply concerned that a strategy for the Rindge School of Technical Arts was completely omitted from the School Improvement Plan for CRLS. No one at the high school seems to be thinking about the value of vocational/career education.

Given our student body demographics, vocational/career programs should be playing a far more important role today for more of our children. High-quality vocational/career programs will lead to increased college

participation and graduation; across the state, they have excelled in the state's accountability system, consistently outperforming all expectations on MCAS tests. Moreover, these students pursue colleges successfully and enter apprenticeship programs and the world of employment successfully.

We are successful with our 11 programs, but there are so many opportunities that we pass over that we have done our students a disservice. Vocational and technical education has far from met its full potential for the many Cambridge students who should be sharing in the city's economic expansion. Our goal should be to fulfill the promise that all children should have easy access to the full range of vocational programs training students for tomorrow's careers.

Some additional steps should include:

- Reaching out to schools to explore a possible Inter Municipal Agreement that may provide greater access to career/technical education programs for Cambridge students.
- Updating and developing new career and technical programs in high-skill, high-wage occupations. These programs should lead directly from secondary to post-secondary education or career employment. A combination of occupation specific training and higher education levels lead to higher earnings.
- Providing a continuum of work site learning experiences for students.
- Offering access to dual-enrollment programs whereby students can take college courses while still in high school.
- Promoting active vocational student organizations.
- Obtaining teacher externships in key industries.
- Recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and administrators.
- Presenting professional development in the use of technology- and standard-based curriculum that lead to increased student achievement.
- Ensuring that funding we get from the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Technical Education Act goes exactly where Congress intended it to go: to help support our 11 vocational programs, not for any other educational purpose, no matter how worthy. Using the money this way will help ensure that our vocational programs meet the high standards established by industry.
- Offering vocational training opportunities for the adults that live in the community.

As we look forward to a growing local economy, our students should be taking advantage of all it may have to offer. This includes strong curricula, preparation for college and career and vocational and technical education for students who will represent the highly skilled workforce to keep Cambridge vibrant and relevant.

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