

The State's Vocational Education Problem

Massachusetts is widely lauded for its world-class universities, competitive public school rankings, and top-notch private high schools. But there's another school system that's locked up in a decades-old conflict affecting thousands of students: vocational education.

By [Miriam Wasser](#) | [Boston Daily](#) | February 13, 2015 2:21 p.m.

19

In 2008, Ed Bouquillon, then the new superintendent of [Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School](#), noticed something odd: dozens of 8th graders who wanted to attend his school weren't allowed to apply.

In Massachusetts, before prospective students can submit applications to Minuteman—or any other vocational school, for that matter—they need their hometown superintendent's approval. Students are rarely denied, and if they are, it's usually because they live in a town that already offers the exact program they hope to study.

Minuteman Tech could be called the Harvard of vocational high schools. Last September, American RadioWorks produced a [four-part documentary](#) that spotlighted it as the example of a 21st-century vocational school.

The school is located in Lexington, but serves as the district vocational school for 16 suburban towns in Middlesex County. Of the 700 or so students who enroll at Minuteman every year, historically about half have come from out-of-district communities.

The 8th graders who weren't allowed to apply to Minuteman were all from out-of-district, but, Bouquillon reasoned, it wasn't like they lived on the other side of the state. They were mostly from Medford, Somerville, and Waltham, towns that have always sent quite a few students to Minuteman. As far as Bouquillon could tell, there was no obvious reason these kids should be prohibited from *applying*.

As he compared the applications, he noticed one thing they all had in common: in the space explaining why an application was denied, the superintendents wrote “the SOLVED Collaborative.”

Bouquillon had never heard of SOLVED, and went looking through the school's file cabinets to see what he could find out about it. He quickly realized that Minuteman Tech's admission problem wasn't in his head—it quite literally spanned a ring around Boston.

• • •

The foundation of any vocational high school program in Massachusetts is the 9th grade exploratory program, a time when freshman cycle through every track in their school before making a final decision about their concentration.

SOLVED, which stands for Shore Occupational Learning and Vocational Education Division, operates like a vocational exchange program. It began in 2003, and gives students from Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, Medford, and Waltham a chance to try concentrations that aren't offered in their hometown. Typically, a town has to pay for tuition and transportation costs when it sends a student out of district, but the SOLVED communities agreed to let their students explore at no or low cost.

Back in Lexington, Bouquillon was skeptical about the collaborative, so he called Jeffrey Wheeler, then the State Director of Career/Vocational Technical Education at the Massachusetts [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#), and asked for data on the program—how many kids went through it? How many subsequently enrolled in a vocational program? Wheeler told Bouquillon that the Department didn't know. Nor had it ever asked. “So you're giving these people money and you're not asking them for any reports?” Bouquillon replied.

Wheeler agreed to start collecting data, and told Bouquillon to call him back in two years.

Three years later, Bouquillon got a report showing that none of the kids who participated in the SOLVED 9th grade exploratory program in the prior two years—there were 63 in 2009 to 2010, and 74 in 2010 to 2011—ended up enrolling in that vocational program as sophomores. The numbers didn't definitively prove that this program was failing students, but in Bouquillon's mind, they hinted that might be the case.

“This isn't diverting some kids, this is denying all kids,” he says. “Its sole purpose was to prevent students from coming to Minuteman.”

Bouquillon says some of the superintendents involved in creating SOLVED even told him outright that they did it to “solve the Minuteman problem,” and he frames the situation as one of good guys versus bad guys: Minuteman against the SOLVED towns.

But talk to the SOLVED superintendents, and they'll say Bouquillon's depiction is misleading. The way they see it, the affluent suburbs of Minuteman's district are unfairly recruiting students from poorer urban areas to have the funding they need to run a top-notch high school.

“It's not so clear-cut that somehow we're villains and Minuteman is truth, justice, and the American way,” says Roy Belson, superintendent of [Medford Public Schools](#). He says the SOLVED towns are trying to keep their kids from going to Minuteman because every dollar spent sending a student to an out-of-district high school is a dollar a town doesn't have to invest in its own schools.

SOLVED advocates say the collaborative allows students to try more programs, but critics say the education pales in comparison to Minuteman. Angry parents often point to Madison Park, [Boston's failing vocational high school](#), and ask why any parent would choose to send their child there—even just for a few weeks—over enrolling full-time at Minuteman.

Parents also receive a lot of inconsistent information about how SOLVED works, leading some to wonder if the collaborative is intended to keep kids from pursuing vocational-technical education.

Last year, when Loreen Cinganelli requested the Minuteman application materials for her son Nicholas, a middle school guidance counselor told her that Medford students were no longer allowed to go to Minuteman because of SOLVED.

From the way the program was explained to Loreen, Nicholas would be enrolled in Medford's vocational high school, and if he wanted to explore a concentration not offered at the school, he would be "ripped out of class" and bused to another SOLVED school.

"My son could have been in math, he could have been in English," Cinganelli says, and "he was going to be pulled when that particular technical career was available."

Heidi Riccio, Director of [Medford's Vocational High Schools](#), says that this isn't an accurate depiction of how the program works. "In education, it's very important that you don't rip kids out of a class to go look at a potential opportunity," she says, likening the SOLVED experience to "going on a field trip."

Which is great, except if you're a parent looking at schools, and Minuteman brings more than a field trip to the table: high-tech programs, a focus on career readiness, and a great track record working with students who have IEPs.

To be fair, the town of Medford has invested a lot of money and resources into its vocational program and made many substantial improvements. But if Bouquillon continues to hear horror stories, then maybe SOLVED's biggest problem isn't Minuteman's tuition, but PR.

• • •

Seven years ago, Bouquillon found himself in the middle of a complicated situation; one that began long before his tenure, and continues to this day. Now, finally, a resolution is in sight.

Last spring, Mitchell Chester, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, proposed changes to the laws and guidelines for vocational education in Massachusetts. One of those rules explicitly states that no 9th grader may enroll in an exploratory program in an out-of-district school. If, after freshman year, students are interested in a program not offered in their town, they can go to an out-of-district school—but, really, how many kids want to switch schools after their freshman year?

A Department of Elementary and Secondary Education task force spent a year researching and formulating these proposals, and then the Board discussed and revised them for months. A final vote is scheduled for February 24.

Belson, who feels that Minuteman has been allowed to benefit at the expense of other communities for way too long, is in favor of this proposal. He says Minuteman is too large a school for an educational district that doesn't value vocational education, and should have been forced to downsize years ago.

"I've got, in a given year, anywhere between \$900,000 and a million dollars going to Minuteman," he adds. "We're not going to idly stand by and have kids picked off to fund a program that can't fund itself."

Without the tuition Minuteman takes in from out-of-district students, the school couldn't function. Downsizing wouldn't just mean enrolling fewer students. It would mean fewer programs and fewer teachers and staff. It would effectively mean eliminating much of what makes it one of the best vocational schools in the country.

That all frightens Bouquillon, as does the prospect of losing out-of-district kids. He believes this rule change will represent a grave educational and economic loss to the school, and to Massachusetts.

“I believe [out-of-district students] bring not only a diversity of race into the school, they bring a diversity of ideas, outlooks, and perspectives that just strengthen the culture here. And it pains me to think of a school without those kids,” he says.

Bouquillon worries a lot about the students who have been denied access to Minuteman in the past few years because of SOLVED. “If a kid doesn’t get what they’re passionate about, they’re not going to be successful in school,” he says.

SOLVED has “effectively denied [kids] access to a career because of money,” he says, banging his hand on the table in front of him.

In any negotiation, as the saying goes, you win some, and you lose some.

But if the Commissioner’s proposals pass, which kids win, and at whose expense?