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## Dan Walters: Technical education fight rages

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The growing popularity – even trendiness – of what we used to call vocational education as an antidote to California's shameful high school dropout rate received another boost the other day when the Little Hoover Commission, a venerable state government watchdog agency, touted its benefits.

Citing an estimated 30 percent high school dropout rate in the state (and over 50 percent in Los Angeles County), the commission said it found "encouraging evidence" that what is now called "career technical education," or CTE, properly focused, "can deliver an alternative approach to learning that can keep students engaged, help improve grade-point averages and prepare students for both the work world and higher education."

The commission recommends that CTE programs already proven to work be replicated around the state "to build a long-term, evidence-based strategy that fully integrates academically rigorous career technical education into the general education programs." It wants partnerships between those running CTE programs and potential employers, and says serious attention should be paid to expanding the shrinking number of teachers with both the technical expertise in their fields and academic credentialing.

The commission's endorsement of CTE was conditioned on its being a "modern, academically demanding form." That places it squarely on one side of a long-simmering debate in education circles, especially among those involved with CTE. The conflict is over whether vocationally oriented courses should be aimed at training students for jobs or more job training immediately after high school, or encompass the college preparatory programs that have been dominant.

Vocational education traditionalists contend that for students with low academic potential or interest but aptitudes for well-paying blue-collar work, the appropriate course is intensive job training. But the college-oriented educational establishment – in an attitude reflected in the Little Hoover Commission report – insists that CTE students must master the same basic academic studies that college prep students complete. Many of today's technical jobs, they argue, require sophisticated mathematics and communications skills. They say CTE students' opportunities to attend four-year colleges later shouldn't be hampered.

CTE has been badly neglected in the rush by educators and politicians to improve the state's abysmal record on academic performance. But with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's active encouragement, born of his own experience with vocational training as a high schooler in Austria, the state is beginning to spend some serious money on improving job-oriented education. The conflict among educators over what form CTE should take, therefore, must be resolved as the money begins to flow, both for building new CTE training facilities and course expansion.

In fact, both sides in the debate are correct. Not all of today's sub-professional jobs are equal. Some are traditional blue-collar jobs that could be filled by high school graduates with little or no additional training. Others are, indeed, high-skill technical positions.

We're beginning to understand that it's wrong and wasteful to assume that students of widely varying degrees of intelligence and aptitude should all be prepared for college when relatively few will actually receive four-year degrees. We should also understand that potential CTE students come with wide variations. One-size-fits-all curricula for them is just as counterproductive.

Our goal should be to provide every student with education that maximizes his or her potential to become a productive, self-supporting member of society. A wide variety of relevant CTE classes can play a major part in reaching that goal.

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