

United States public-school authorities have gone under the false assumption that every student capable of doing college-level work should go to college, and that other normally intelligent youngsters should have a strictly academic high-school program.

This has meant that training for blue-collar jobs has too often been given only to the academically weak, emotionally immature, and socially inferior. National statistics emphasize this imbalance. Of the children born in 1944, 19 percent left school before the 11th grade; 30 percent didn't finish high school. Thirty-five percent entered college, but only 20 percent was graduated with a bachelor's degree.

This means that 8 of every 10 boys and girls were available to fill jobs which did not need a college degree. Only one out of the eight received any occupational training in the public schools.

VOCATIONAL SKILL IN DEMAND

To put it another way, 70 percent of today's 23-year-olds had no job training in school and have not completed a college education. Yet nearly 80 percent of all the jobs available in the United States require some vocational or technical skill.

Only now are public schools acknowledging that they were wrong to overemphasize academics at the expense of vocational education. To make up for past neglect, schools across the United States are today putting in equipment, upgrading vocational faculty, giving more vocational guidance to good students, and beginning to work closely with advisory teams from labor, business, and industry.

Two schools, one which specializes in vocational education and the other which is a comprehensive high school, have been in the business of schooling for skills for many years. They point the way for other school districts.

The Allentown high schools have been offering vocational education alongside academic education to young Pennsylvanians since 1916. George W. Elison, the present director of vocational education in Allentown, feels very strongly about the need to keep schooling for skills as well as college in one comprehensive high school. The vocational students spend half their time in the shops, and the other half in academic courses mixed into classes with the nonvocational students.

The choice of courses taught in Allentown reflects the job needs of the community. In 1966-67 Allentown's two high schools offered: auto-body repair, auto-mechanics, brick masonry, cabinetmaking, carpentry, chemical technology, architectural drafting, mechanical drafting, general electricity, electronics technology, radio and TV servicing, machine-shop practice, plumbing-heating-cooling, printing, welding and fabrication, distributive education (salesmanship).

The Allentown school district also operates an adult vocational-education program. Formal courses are available there in chemical technology, data processing, computer programing, doctor's assistant, practical nursing, and a very special six-week course in tractor-trailer driving.

The day I visited the truck-driving course, student drivers were out on the range going through prescribed maneuvers. Mornings are spent in the classroom going over driving techniques, simple truck repair, and rules of the road. So thorough is the program that drivers who successfully pass the course get credit for two years of driving experience.

The truck-driving course, like the doctor's assistant program, was set up to meet an immediate employment need in the area.

The chemistry laboratory is used both for students taking advanced-placement chemistry and those in chemical technology. The chemistry students are preparing to enter four-year colleges with advanced standing in chemistry. The chemical-technology students are preparing either for technical college or immediate employment as laboratory technicians. Whichever the goal, the facilities far exceed what would be available in a strictly academic high-school chemistry lab.

Nearly 200 business and labor leaders in Allentown make up the advisory staff for the vocational and technical courses. These community leaders help to keep the programs updated, replace equipment, train the shop teachers, and help in the placement of the graduates. Just as Allentown's academic program reflects the thinking of college professors, so the vocational program is influenced by labor and business leaders.