



Interview with Randy Dorn Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction

What is Career and Technical Education?

Career and Technical Education is taking academic education and applied learning, putting it together, so kids are motivated to learn about current trends. And it's really preparing them for the 21st century because jobs change over all the time, and so Career and Technical Education changes over all the time, so they stay current. They understand that this is usable and this might prepare them for something they truly want to do.

A lot of education is learning knowledge. Gosh, it might make you a great contestant on Jeopardy. But what can you really use it for? These kids see it first-hand. They look at a career field and they get to connect with the people that actually do it in the real world.

The way you learn math and science — really learn it — is by doing. I myself learn by doing! Some kids can do the learning by the book, but kids in Career and Technical Education get both. And that really, truly makes a difference.

So, Career and Technical Education is a pretty simple formula. It's academic education with applied education. It's also the cutting edge education for what's happening out in the business world today.

Sometimes it's even what's going to happen in the future. An example is the new green economy. We're putting money into it as a federal government, as a state government — biodiesel, wind and solar. Some of it hasn't been invented yet, and yet we're developing curricula to be sure that students have the background.

So, it's cutting-edge, it's what students enjoy because it's applied. It's knowledge they're getting and then using, and they feel very good about themselves when that happens.

What types of careers can be explored by students in Washington public schools?

We have 16 groups of careers — construction, agriculture, all kinds of technologies. We create new classes on a yearly basis to match the needs of industry. Whether it's technology, business, agriculture, it's very current, all with a connection to academics, to math and science.

Career and Technical Education is much improved over the old vocational education. We're trying to meet academic standards at the same time. We're connecting to the trades, and we're connecting to business people. It's not just up to the teacher — it's bringing business into the classroom, and students going out in the field and seeing it actually work.

How many students in Washington take CTE classes?

The number of students in the State of Washington that take Career and Technical Education is, rounded, 240,000. It changes on a yearly basis because as soon as you know what the new trend is in business, and that new field opens up, we move a class into that. The students are engaged and they want to be part of it.

I believe that we're going to grow in the future and we're going to see more classes coming into the high school. And now we have the ability to move into the middle schools too, and that's a huge advantage.

Career and Technical Education survived dramatic budget cuts in the next biennium. As a former legislator, why do you think CTE was protected by the 2009 Legislature?

Well, we had a difficult budget this year and I have to tell you, being a former legislator, I was surprised by how Career and Technical Ed survived the budget. I believe the reason for that is the hard work that business has done, and Career and Technical Ed teachers, and administrators.

This isn't just about providing students career opportunity and educational opportunity, it also keeps students in school, and they look at Career and Technical Ed as a dropout prevention program. Because the regular academic education, the sit and get learning, it does not always work for every student.

You can engage students and once they see how robotics works and technology, they go, "Oh! Now I see why I need geometry! Why I need science!" And then the kid re-engages in his academic education, so it works hand-in-hand.

Career and Technical Ed develops a lot more students and has a wider range than just that academic band for kids getting an education.

What are the top reasons why you, as Superintendent of Public Instruction, support Career and Technical Education in Washington?

First of all, it works. That's number one. It works!

Two, it engages students. They take knowledge and they actually use it. That makes a tremendous difference.

Three, it's cutting edge. It connects students to what's actually happening in the real world. They go out into the business world, and the business world comes to them.

I believe that we've been so focused on academic education, we lose sense of why students want to learn. Because they're interested. And they want to do it. This gives them a chance to actually view things they might want to do in life. And it can even get them college-ready.

It opens up a lot of avenues. They meet people they would never meet, and that expands their awareness of what's available to them. It expands the choices they're going to make. It can be for personal reasons, like automotive, just something they want to learn, or it might be something they're interested in as a career.

So there are a lot of options there, and it opens up a lot of doors. I think it truly helps to engage students and be their own navigator and guidance person in their education.

If you were talking with parents of students who were definitely going to attend a four-year college, or even graduate school, what would you say to them about why their children should consider taking some CTE classes in high school?

Well, to me that's pretty simple. What you find out is the students that are heavily involved in Career and Technical Education may be in the construction trades but they want to be architects. They're in the health services end of things but they want to be a nurse, a doctor, an X-ray technician. All those are setting the foundation of knowledge of what they're going to move into and what their interest level is.

I always tell kids, "If you figure out what challenges you — your interest and your aptitude — all you then need is the education and training to have a career." Something they like to do, and they get paid to do it.

That's what Career and Technical Education is about. It exposes you to all these different fields. And most of the training is going to go on to another year after high school, or two, or four. You can start off at one level and keep moving up. So I think it's a huge advantage.

What new Career and Technical Education initiatives will be pursued in our state in 2009-2011?

Green technology. We'll have new courses and new materials connected to green technology.

More dual-credit courses — CTE classes that are counted as academic classes in math, science and technology, for high school graduation credit *and* college credit.

We will fund grants for middle schools, so we engage kids in Career and Technical Education in the earlier grades. Show them the relevancy of how education is used in the real world.

Build partnerships where there is a huge need right now. It shouldn't just be colleges and the military recruiting kids in schools, it should also be some of these labor unions and apprentice programs, where there are tremendous opportunities. Jobs right out of high school, family wage jobs, great benefits, healthcare, all those things.

If money for Career and Technical Education were plentiful, what improvements would you make to the Career and Technical Education program, and why?

Make sure that the equipment is there in all our programs. Cutting-edge equipment — the equipment that's used on a daily basis in the real world. So students say, "Boy, this is really useful. This is preparing me for the future."

Recruit people that have worked in the field into the schools, so that they have that knowledge of the most current things.

Give parents a better understanding of where the opportunities are, and where the education is — it might be one year out of high school, it might be a technical or community college, it might be the military, it might be apprenticeship, it might be on-the-job training.

We've been in an era that every kid and every parent wants their kid to go to a university. But that's not what society is made up of. And many companies are looking for specifically-skilled students and young people to come to them.

What role will Career and Technical Education have in the economic recovery of our state, and in the development of a green technology economy in our state?

Career and Technical Education will play a big part in the recovery of our state.

That's a great thing about Career and Technical Education — there has to be that connection with the business world — how quickly job settings change, and how quickly can you change to match up to the future. Businesses know where the jobs are and they help guide students to make their best choices so they have an opportunity beyond high school. Connecting students up to opportunities is going to make a big difference.

I believe the green economy's going to be a perfect example. We already have a curriculum, we have different classes that are being established on the green economy and green energy, yet some of those jobs aren't even there yet. We're anticipating they're going to be there, because of the national stimulus package and how the Obama administration wants to fund the green economy. Same with Gov. Gregoire.

That's what's great about Career and Technical Education. How do you make sure that students are getting the education they need that matches up with what's out in the business world?

So, I think it's going to be a big element. When we reset government and we reset our economy, there's going to be changes that we haven't even thought of yet. It's upon us to change the high schools, so we get kids engaged where we have the need.

What does CTE do to help students plan for their future?

Career and Technical Education guidance can really help kids because it helps them make better decisions.

I believe we need more types of guidance for students. It shouldn't be, "Because a four-year degree worked for me, I think that's the only thing that can work for you." We're going to have to educate our teaching staff to a much bigger degree on what the opportunities are out there.

A lot of school guidance counselors and academic teachers in middle high school don't understand what CTE is or what its value is. How do we reach them?

Get those teachers connected to people that are out in the field and that thoroughly enjoy what they do. They have high levels of training.

I was talking to a metal-worker the other day and he literally said to me, "If the engineer would only come and talk to us first before they designed something, we could solve a lot of problems."

You have to get teachers and people that come from the work world who say, "You know, this is what I did. I'm very successful, I enjoy what I do. You should come out to my work site and see what I do, because what I do is pretty cool."

The level of sophistication today of, of some career fields takes a tremendous amount of education, but it's something you just can't learn in a book, you actually have to do it.

How can Career and Technical Education lower high school drop-out rates and build hope among the 80 percent of our young people who cannot afford or who are not interested in pursuing a four-year college or university degree immediately following graduation?

Well it's pretty simple for me. Kids won't be bored. If they sit in an algebra class and it's "sit and get learning," they get bored. Half of our kids aren't very good learners in that type of setting. When you have an engaging, hands-on, applied type of course, kids get engaged and they want to be there.

Statistics show the reason why kids are dropping out of school is they're bored. It's hard to get bored in a Career and Technical Ed class when you're actually doing something.

Is there hard evidence that where you have Career and Technical Ed courses there are fewer dropouts? And that there are better test scores? The answer is yes! We can show it time and time again. When kids get bored in a plain academic course, we're going to lose a segment of the population, there's no doubt about it. So we should give kids the option to take academic courses and Career and Technical Ed courses. That's the best of both worlds.

How can parents and the labor, business and elected leaders in our communities help to build up and ensure the success of CTE programs?

I believe they have to go to the school and get involved in the Career and Technical Education program. Recruit great business partners into the school, and have students go view what's going on in the real world. Educate themselves on what are the opportunities in our workforce.

So, if healthcare is your career field, go out and view the different venues and clinics and hospitals, and where the delivery systems are, and see where you fit, because there's a thousand different titles of jobs in healthcare. Even if you want to be a doctor, there's probably over a couple hundred areas to be a doctor, so exactly what do you want to do?