

# THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

## Notes from New York City



BY MICHAEL MULGREW

In New York City, as in many places across the country, there is much discussion about strengthening career and technical education (CTE). I find this talk extremely heartening since my background has allowed me to bridge the long-standing divide between traditional academic classes and vocational education, a divide that is discussed in this issue of *American Educator*.

Years before I became president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), I was an English teacher and a professional carpenter. Because of my passion both for literature and for working

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Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

with my hands, I have always been committed to ensuring that all students have access to core academic subjects as well as courses that prepare them to earn certifications in technical fields and work in skilled trades.

Accordingly, I have followed with keen interest the current attention

CTE is receiving from education experts and policymakers. I take great pride in how New York City's approach to CTE is held up as a model for getting this type of education right. For instance, about a year ago, the UFT and the Albert Shanker Institute, in cooperation with the CTE Technical Assistance Center of New York, organized a conference titled *Fulfilling the Promise of a Quality Education for All: 21st Century Career and Technical Education*, a two-day event held at UFT headquarters in New York City. A policy statement\* calling for high-quality CTE was released at this conference, which many of the top CTE experts from government, academia, and policy organizations attended.

While the bulk of the conference featured presentations and panel discussions, the morning of the second day was devoted to

\*To read the full statement, visit [www.shankerinstitute.org/21st-century-career-technical-education](http://www.shankerinstitute.org/21st-century-career-technical-education).

school visits. Conference attendees were able to visit a handful of excellent New York City CTE schools: Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-Tech), Transit Tech CTE High School, Food and Finance High School, Urban Assembly New York Harbor School, Aviation High School, and Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School. Each of these schools has a different CTE theme: At P-Tech, students study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; at Transit Tech, they study industrial electronics; and at Food and Finance, they study culinary arts. Urban Assembly specializes in aquaculture, marine biology, ocean engineering, and vessel operations; Aviation High School focuses on aviation maintenance technology; and Thomas Edison features programs in automotive technology, graphic arts, and robotics. Conference participants attended classes, spoke with students and teachers, and got a firsthand look at engaging and challenging curricula that prepare students for both postsecondary education and the workplace.

These six schools represent only a fraction of the many CTE programs that New York City currently offers. And it is important to remember that these terrific schools were not established overnight. It took us a long time to get to this point. The UFT worked closely with the New York City Department of Education (which at one time actually tried to shut down the city's CTE programs, but more on that later) and local industry partners to help start many of these programs; doing so was a huge struggle. Our story of forging the relationships necessary to create these strong programs holds lessons for other cities looking to engage students in career and technical education.

### Student Engagement with Meaningful Work

Before I explain the history of the partnership that New York City, the UFT, and local businesses now enjoy, I'd like to set the stage by describing how CTE was once a neglected part of the educational experience in the city. Because of the direction my own career took, I saw that neglect firsthand. In 1992, I took a position as an English teacher at William E. Grady High School, a vocational school in Brooklyn, where I ended up teaching for 12 years. Before becoming a teacher, I had been a professional carpenter for 11 years. I worked for a construction company and was also in business for myself. I became a carpenter because I enjoyed working with my hands and building things. I decided to become an English teacher because I am an avid reader and love working with children.

Given my experience as a carpenter, the city's department of education assigned me to teach at a vocational school. But I had

a license to teach English. While I had worked full time as a carpenter as I pursued my bachelor's degree in English at night and on weekends, I came to the teaching profession because I wanted to teach English—not carpentry. Still, the district assigned me to Grady. When I arrived for my first day, I remember having to make that point yet again after the principal tried to assign me to a carpentry class.

After our conversation, the principal finally understood that I really was there to teach English. He assigned me to a class of 28 "at-risk" students—meaning those with behavior problems and poor attendance records—who were taught in this huge classroom in the basement of the school. I quickly found out how tough teaching was.

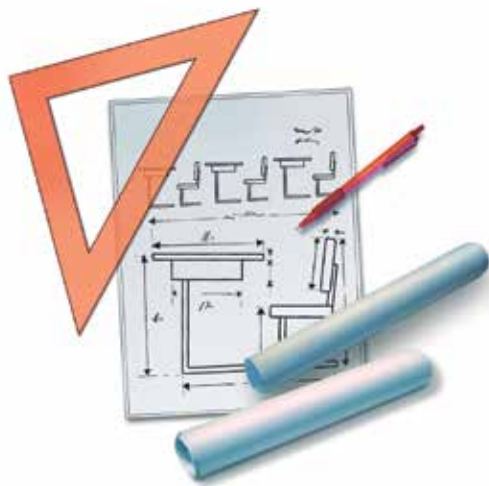
I wanted to engage these students and teach them to write. But they had trouble staying seated and focusing on their work. So I tried drawing on my background in theater and filmmaking—I had taken many college-level film studies courses and had worked as a production assistant on a film set—to find things that would interest them. Why? Because the key to high-quality CTE, though we often talk about its strengths in terms of economic opportunity, is that it engages students in a meaningful way—it keeps them interested in school and classwork.

With an eye toward doing just that, I started to design a program around writing scripts and filmmaking, which are not traditional CTE topics but at

Grady were considered part of the CTE program. Like traditional CTE courses, such as welding and automotive technology, my course had the potential to engage students in a different yet compelling way.

I discovered, hidden away in the basement with my class, a closet that contained two broken video cameras. Even though they were broken, I showed them to my students and suggested that once their scripts were up to par we might be able to produce and record their stories on camera. Seeing the cameras was enough incentive for them to get right to work.

It took months but they improved their writing, and we reached the point where their scripts were ready for filming. Undeterred by the fact that the cameras didn't work, I had a plan to get the school to purchase us new ones. Basketball was a big deal at Grady, so I cut a deal with the principal: if the school would purchase some working equipment, we could use it both to record the basketball games and in my classroom with my students. We got new video cameras soon after that, and my English class really took off. Students no longer had trouble staying seated and focusing on assignments. They looked forward to writing scripts and filming them. Here was a vocational educa-



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tion class that did not underestimate students; rather, it challenged them with engaging, meaningful work.

I got into this profession to make a positive difference in kids' lives, and seeing that transformation was incredibly rewarding. I never looked back after that; I knew I was right where I wanted to be.

## Industry Allies

I decided to become involved in the union, and in 1999, I became a UFT chapter leader at the school. Soon after, I met Frank Carucci, the UFT's vice president for vocational education, during a training for new chapter leaders. Frank told us, "We are going to change 'vocational education' into 'career and technical education.'" He said that we needed to make CTE relevant to the job market, meaning we needed to prepare students for the workplace and also to make CTE more academically rigorous in order to prepare students for postsecondary education. It was a new concept that made perfect sense, and we all rallied behind it. Frank explained that some vocational education programs hadn't changed their curricula in 30 years and were teaching skills that were no longer relevant. He also asked us to speak at public events throughout the city—such as parents' meetings—to spread the word about our plans to make vocational education more rigorous and explain how CTE courses actually cover material from core academic subjects such as mathematics and science.

During our presentations to parents and various community groups, we explained that this change in emphasis from the traditional vocational education approach to a CTE perspective was rooted in a deep concern that a large segment of the student population was just not engaged in learning. We stressed that the focus in education was too skewed toward testing (as it still is today). The fixation on testing—then, as now—was driving a large percentage of children out of our schools. Parents listened to us and agreed. They supported the push to strengthen CTE.

When Frank retired in 2005, I ran to succeed him and became the UFT's vice president for career and technical education high schools, a position I held for four years. He left at a time when the New York City Department of Education was planning to close many CTE schools. The reason, officials said, was that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) forced them to focus on boosting students' English and math standardized test scores. CTE programs did not focus on standardized tests, they said, and could not help accomplish the NCLB mission.

Their misguided approach led to a big behind-the-scenes fight between the UFT and the department. To win it, we ended up reaching out to local industry and created public-private partner-

ships to help persuade department officials not only to keep CTE schools open, but to strengthen them.

We were fortunate enough to have a great and influential industry council in New York City. The council is a group of labor and management volunteers from various businesses and trades: the airline industry, the Greater New York Automobile Dealers Association, and the construction trades, among others. These industry volunteers partner with CTE schools to certify the curriculum so that students are gaining the knowledge and skills to prepare them for careers in the fields that the council represents.

The beauty of CTE programs is that students can graduate with industry-recognized certifications that would cost them up to \$45,000 if they were to pursue these credentials on their own after high school. We told council members that the department planned to close CTE programs, which prepared many of their companies' employees and, in fact, could prepare them more effectively if the programs were better supported.

To make our case, the UFT presented the council with data showing that CTE programs helped average and below-average students stay in school and find well-paying jobs or pursue further education and training after graduation. Members of the council listened to our position, reviewed the data, and agreed that the department's plan to close these schools made no sense. Thankfully, the council had, and continues to have, real and meaningful relationships with schools.

Soon after, we presented the same data to lawmakers in Albany, and I continued meeting with city officials who realized that shutting down what the industry partners wanted was not the right course of

action, from either a business or an education perspective.

After those meetings, the city created a task force—made up of representatives from the New York State Education Department, the New York State Board of Regents, the New York City Education Department, the UFT, real estate developers, and Wall Street firms—to review and strengthen CTE programs and even to establish some new ones to better meet the hiring needs of the industry council. Thanks to the work of the task force, New York City now has more definitive pipelines for graduates of CTE programs to go directly into jobs in various industries, if students decide not to pursue a college degree. Those who employ CTE graduates see there is real "value added" for them to hire these students because they recognize how well-prepared they are—preparation that in turn makes them great employees.

## Spreading the Word

I sometimes wonder why our collaborative work around CTE in New York City has not spread as widely to other parts of the country.



Implemented correctly, CTE provides students with options to pursue a job *and* a career—not one at the expense of the other.



Maybe it's because, in too many places, education debates continue to focus solely on test scores instead of how best to prepare children holistically for the world in which they must work and live. The reputation of CTE also suffers as a result of the deplorable practice of "tracking," a policy in which vocational education was too often viewed as a dumping ground for students—usually students of color and working-class kids generally—who were assumed to be incapable of doing challenging work. In some instances, vocational education was characterized by classes that neither provided students with rigorous, intellectually stimulating material, nor equipped them with the skills necessary for future employment.

I can't stress this often enough: high-quality CTE does not involve tracking. Implemented correctly, CTE provides students with options to pursue a job *and* a career—not one at the expense of the other. CTE lays the groundwork for training right after high school that leads to a job or, in some cases, provides the actual training students need to find jobs immediately. CTE also prepares students for postsecondary education that culminates in some kind of advanced degree. The six CTE programs that attendees of the New York City conference visited nearly a year ago (mentioned earlier) do not track children; students would never have been accepted into these programs unless they were top-notch.

Our programs succeed in New York due in large part to four fundamental program components: teacher preparation and development; school supports, including a high-quality curriculum, mentoring, student competitions, and scholarships; work-based learning, such as internships and job shadowing programs; and access to real-world industry applications and credentials.

Today, the debate over CTE is really about "how do we move it forward?" We were lucky enough that two years ago, in his State of the Union address, President Obama talked about career and technical education. "Let's also make sure that a high school diploma puts our kids on a path to a good job," he said. "Right now, countries like Germany focus on graduating their high school students with the equivalent of a technical degree from one of our community colleges. So those German kids, they're ready for a job when they graduate high school."\*

In his address, the president also mentioned P-Tech, which Obama himself visited last year. "Now at schools like P-Tech in Brooklyn, a collaboration between New York [City] public schools and City University of New York and IBM, students will graduate

with a high school diploma and an associate's degree in computers or engineering," he said. "We need to give every American student opportunities like this."

It has taken a lot of political work to get to this point. But we are nowhere near finished. How do we advocate for CTE inside each school system in the entire country, not just in New York City? That is the question we face.

More people support CTE than ever before because the economic development aspect of it appeals to them. CTE helps prepare students to enter the workplace, which private industry wholeheartedly supports. But the other piece that makes CTE so compelling—even though it's rarely talked about—is the engagement of students and how CTE helps to shape them into better people, equipped with real skills to help them thrive in the world.

Students who graduate from CTE programs leave school with industry certifications in computer engineering, automotive technology, graphic arts, and culinary arts, just to name a few examples. While these certifications show they're prepared with the knowledge and skills to work in a certain field, what such documents also really say is that this student has been actively engaged in his or her learning, has figured out how to work in groups, and has developed all those critical-thinking skills that education experts constantly emphasize.

Just as important, certifications show that students have acquired the "soft skills" (though I dislike the term)—such as perseverance and determination—that enable them to face defeat and pick themselves up so they can turn a loss into a victory. For me, there is nothing "soft" about such skills. They are important social-emotional developments that we often don't value enough in education.

Children who complete CTE courses have had to figure out tough lessons: for instance, how to work with their peers and how to solve problems for which there are no easy answers. They can't just look it up

in a book. They must figure out in other ways how to complete something real, like wiring a house, building a transmission, or maintaining an airplane. When talk in education turns to students having to compete with the rest of the world, academic knowledge, soft skills, and knowledge of technical subjects are what our children are going to need to know.

The emergence of high-quality CTE programs has energized teachers across New York City, and I hope word about their good work continues to spread throughout the country. Their message is simple: CTE is a viable and rigorous educational option for children, and one that should be expanded and enhanced. Not only does CTE engage students in new and powerful ways, but it also ensures that students are college and career ready. □



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\*To read the full transcript of the State of the Union address, visit [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address).