Oregon schools and jobs: Students say every skill opens another door

By Susan Nielsen, The Oregonian

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Sabrina Mohammed, a student at Benson High School in Portland, is getting trained as a certified nursing assistant -- a lower-wage, lower-prestige job that doesn't require a college degree. Yet she doesn't feel limited or tracked. In fact, she says the training will further her career goal of becoming ... a doctor.

"I want to be well-rounded," the senior says. "This will help me get hands-on experience working with people."

Mohammed is the new face of career and technical education in Oregon -- or she should be. Her ambitions are worth remembering as Oregon tries to restore job training in high schools and, by doing so, inevitably revives old fears about tracking teenagers into non-college jobs. Such fears are unwarranted, at least for schools that maintain high academic standards.

Done well, elective classes in welding, nursing or auto repair can actually expand students' horizons rather than limit them.

That's what students tell me, as they explain why job-related classes lit a fire under their education.

Career and technical education (CTE) for teenagers is enjoying a new surge of attention as one good solution to high dropout rates and the shortage of skilled workers. Oregon schools are hunting for ways to bring the goal of "college and career readiness" to life, and CTE classes may play a starring role. This prospect is both intriguing and worrisome to anyone who remembers vocational education from 20 years ago, when certain kids were deemed unfit for college and then tracked in a direction that limited their options.

But CTE is different now, students of better programs say. Job readiness is folded into the school day as part of a strategy to teach teenagers how to become more self-sufficient and aware.

Learning welding isn't just about welding, in other words. Learning how to assist an elderly person who recently had a stroke isn't just about meeting the state's demand for more health care workers. These experiences also help develop a sense of competence and a broader frame of
reference beyond one's teenage self.

Roman Crone, a senior at the Clackamas Academy of Industrial Sciences in Oregon City, says his internship with a local manufacturer "opened doors for me that I wouldn't think of opening" and taught him not just technical skills but teamwork, too.

"If one person doesn't do his job," Crone explains, "it can affect the whole operation."

Dakota Keith, one of his classmates, echoes that discovery. "It seems weird, but the bigger the business, the more important that everyone does their job or the whole line backs up," Keith says. "It is really a community, and you have to work together to nurture that community."

I've heard many Oregon business owners say younger applicants often lack both hard skills and "soft skills," such as a strong work ethic and time management ability. Some of these business owners have found great satisfaction (and handpicked some good employees) by working with local schools or community colleges to offer internships and job shadows. Unfortunately, much of this work is uncoordinated and unreplicated. For school districts with big classes and budget woes, the logistics of setting up and supervising work experiences for hundreds of students are daunting.

Still, students in CTE classes say Oregon should keep trying. Their enthusiasm is contagious.

Haley Lamb, a senior at Benson High, cheerfully describes herself as "not the brightest crayon in the box" yet speaks with confidence about learning to rebuild an engine, study electronics and mentor other girls interested in technical work. She says she probably would have dropped out if not for her automotive teacher.

Her classmates tell different stories but with similar themes: Their passion for school bloomed once they started learning cool stuff like designing houses, fabricating metal and mastering Web design.

They don't seem locked into certain jobs by taking job-specific electives. They don't sound like widgets in a workforce factory, fulfilling businesses' needs rather than their own dreams. Mostly, these teenagers sound capable and prepared, ready for their next job or college class.

That CTE experience didn't just expand their horizons. It helped them grow up.

-- Associate editor Susan Nielsen, The Oregonian.

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