

BECOMING WHAT WE TEACH

Career-Connected Learning in the 21st Century



**Mario Penalver,
MA MAE**

*CTE Multimedia &
Robotics, Harbor
Ridge Middle School,
Peninsula SD*

Dear America, We have a problem.

Don't get me wrong. We have plenty to be proud of: great roads, an incredible diversity of people and ideas, that wonderful thing called the Constitution. Our school systems are free, sort of. They boast the ability to teach us the things of the world: our nation's history (well, most of it anyway), some important civic facts that will one day pay off when we go to the voting booth.

Our problem actually starts there.

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Improving Instruction, Aligning Curriculum,
Closing the Gap*

“ We failed to learn THE skill of direct connection between that coveted living-wage job we need to survive, and the skills we need to keep it.”

That's because we failed to learn an essential skill before we walked away from the institutions of education. We failed to learn THE skill of direct connection between that coveted living-wage job we need to survive, and the skills we need to keep it.

It's not entirely your fault, though. You deserve better. You deserve an educational system that speaks to the job market you're about to enter when you walk off that graduation stage — and along with that system, the knowledge you need to compete in the job market.

The movement of career-connected learning is of paramount importance, not just for me as a teacher of CTE, but ought to be for every educator in a nation starved — literally — by a career/skill dis-junction. We have an urgency to upend what is the great fight of our times in the education industry. When you read statistics like a skills gap

in America that is 7.3 million jobs wide and growing (US Department

of Labor, 2019), or the fact that our high school students are walking into college with no viable or specific plan for their professional future, leaving college with skills they didn't need at a cost they will never be able to pay back (Success in the New Economy, 2015), how can we not but translate that into an urgent call to action? That awareness is our ethical charge to help schools and school systems think career first, then skills second, with both wrapped in the passions that drive our students to be the best they can be.

To that end, CTE can't just be a verb. It isn't the act of relegating career education to a subject one of us teaches in an elective class once a day. Instead, it's who we become as an entire institution of learning when we start to redefine our educational systems — and all of us inside of them — as modems for career paths. If we start there, then we start to think, breathe, and articulate information not for its own sake, but for the arterial that it ought to be for a more skilled and employed society. In that sense, the Achievement Gap, the Opportunity Gap, or any “Gap”



Harbor Ridge 6th, 7th and 8th graders and members of the after-school CTE program, ProStage, manage a local high school graduation.

that clogs the airways of pundit blogs and policy hearings, is nothing more than a series of institutions that — either by design or by forced habit — prevent students from acquiring the skills they need to be competitive after high school. CTE, to that end, must be who we are as educators of an employable future. It MUST be who we are as systems of employability, as the mortar that closes the Gap of missed Opportunity.

That is CTE.



Seventh grader, Faith Stock, sketches story boards for a local film competition.

And to get there, a shift must happen regarding those who are not, properly speaking, teachers of CTE frameworks. That shift is our mindset about career-connected learning from something that is “taught,” to something that we, as a whole school, BECOME. While we CTE teachers at the building level are there to provide various classes in career-readiness, I would like to think of this as a first step. The second step is to usher in a shift in the entire school’s culture, so that EVERY teacher is providing a career-ready attitude and content to their students, regardless of whether the course is located in the CTE Lab, or in Ms. Smith’s 6th grade math room down the hall.

Considering that shift in perspective for myself, my past year has centered around attempting to affect the entire building with my program, rather than just my classroom in isolation. As an example, my students and I

found a niche market in our school for an event management club. Managed almost entirely by the students themselves, ProStage, as we’ve branded it, provides event logistics, multimedia and technical support for every on-site school event, using a public website and online form to help our teachers guide themselves toward what services they need of us. The students saw a market inside the ecosystem of the school, they developed their own system for addressing that market, and they are responding and revising their system to make it work for the “clients” of the school.

That helps expose our school to CTE. But we must go further.... I must go further. The next step for me would be to work with the building administrators to carve language in our school’s SIP that is both specific and measurable, and which facilitates a career-ready mindset by establishing benchmarks for career-readiness, defining measurable outcomes across curriculums, across platforms, across all subjects, and amongst all teachers, in every classroom.

Archimedes said it best. “Give me a lever long enough...and I will move the earth.” We simply need to invest more of our resources, and more of our time into shifting our understanding of what the school is, and why it exists. Even while CTE is traditionally separated from the traditional classroom, research indicates that tying content to real-life, role-play and applied situational learning projects produces far-higher engagement and much deeper retention of material (Thomas, 2000). Work-based, linked learning is correlated with higher attendance and graduation rates (NAF, 2011; Colley & Jamison, 1998).

It is essential that we stop thinking of CTE programming as necessarily separate from other subject matters,



Harbor Ridge seventh grader and CTE student, Tesfa Hoff, works with his team to design a robot that types on a keyboard.

and consider it as an essential fabric of the educational experience. The trending data from the Department of Labor spells out just how urgent this Call to Action is. For the twelfth straight month in a row, a continued shortage of skilled labor, specifically in STEM fields (Campbell, 2019; US Department of Labor, 2019) has continued to rise above the number people in America able to fill them.

As much as this trend is an indicator of job/skill mismatch, it is just as much a comment on our educational systems, which are providing much information, but little career-connected learning. And combined with the \$1.5 trillion our children collectively owe in student debt, second only to mortgage debt as the highest consumer debt category in the nation (Friedman, 2019), suffice it to say that CTE has some work to do. And maybe it’s not just CTE, since it clearly takes more than a program to turn an educational reform into a reconstruction.

This reconstruction starts when we stop thinking of career learning as a verb, and we start thinking about it as a noun. Career and Technical Education — for the CTE teacher who specializes in it, for the building administrator who oversees it, for the program director who funds it, for the staff members who call themselves colleagues next to it — is not what we do; it’s who we MUST become if we want our students to respect what is at stake when they leave behind the relative financial and social safety

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nets of our classrooms, and enter into an unforgiving world that expects them to pay their bills.

We'll get there. A change of this magnitude requires persistence. It requires passion. It requires the leadership experience to know who to talk to, how to motivate, and the resources to turn our schools into the career-ready powerhouses they need to be for our students. So that we can become, in short, what we are trying to teach: CTE. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mario Penalver (BA, MA Education, Pacific Lutheran University; MA Humanities, University of Chicago) was 2017 Teacher of the Year at Truman Middle School in Tacoma, Washington, a News Tribune (Tacoma, Washington) Reader Columnist in 2015 and has contributed to the Seattle Times Education Lab, The

National Catholic Reporter, USA Today and New York University's London magazine, Bedford Square, of which he was a founding editor. He teaches MultiMedia, Robotics and Film Making at Harbor Ridge Middle School in Gig Harbor.



From left, CTE Chief Executive Officer, Anabel Bedlan, meets with TSA President, Ben Roberts, and Chief Financial Officer, Natalie Gwinner, to hire the Division Managers for each CTE course at Harbor Ridge.

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