

Opinion

Renewed emphasis on technical education is now a necessity

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Here's to every man — or woman — who ever hoisted a hammer in pursuit of a career.

And here's to every young person smart enough these days to chase after a skilled



Grubaugh

trade. They are out there for the taking, these professions are, and we need to focus on the needs now more than ever.

Last month's opening in Belleville of a facility for career, technical and alternative education is welcome news in Southwestern Illinois. It's one of a handful of recent, positive examples of what needs to be done.

It's never too late to begin readdressing vocational education.

Educators missed the boat years ago when they started scaling back money placed into voc-ed and put more emphasis on programs that would encourage students to go instead to traditional college. Now, officials are scrambling to re-establish the hands-on emphasis. While a thorough education is still paramount, there is no time like

the present to focus on hard skills.

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 first authorized federal funding for vocational education in American schools. The Act described voc-ed as preparation for careers not requiring a bachelor's degree.

Back then, vocational education was seen as a means of getting lesser-income students into the working world, even as wealthy families had the chance to send their own kids to college. That has pivoted of late: Backers of career and technical education now say vocational graduates have an edge, what with the accessibility and affordability of secondary education a growing concern.

Voc-ed focuses on specific training for a particular job or career. Years ago, those jobs were viewed as mostly hands-on fields, like carpentry, auto repair, HVAC installation, cosmetology, welding and electrical. With the computer age came a host of other vocations now included in courses, from medical transcriptionist to family science, and fields as diverse as agriculture, business, education and food prep.

The last few years I have seen an extraordinary response to the growing vocation challenge from the federal government and the state of Illinois. There are now more apprenticeship programs to build the population of the trades. There are several career fair expos focusing on them. Programs are

filtering up beginning at the elementary level. Community colleges have made major improvements.

And now, we have this welcome example from Belleville Township High School District 201, which this summer opened its learning facility known as "The CAVE." The Center for Academic Vocational Excellence is in the old Kings Point Sports Club off Illinois Route 15.

The CAVE houses the district's career and technical education programs and its alternative education students. It is also the recreational and training hub for 201's athletic programs.

Colleague Melissa Meske profiled the operation in the IBJ's September issue. The CAVE offers instruction in the trades, skilled careers and entrepreneurship. Nine career and technical education teachers were added this year. The place is loaded with cutting-edge technology appropriate for many of today's workers. I encourage you to read Melissa's article on the subject.

Historically, these courses and the skills they represent are what built the America of today. The newer technical programming is what will lead to the America of tomorrow.

Here's why that's important: More than any time in the past century, we need craftsmen and women to fill the rank and file of our skilled trades. You've heard the

clarion call during the last few years as the pandemic hit home, the "great retirement" and "great resignation" took effect and people's moods about working in general began to change.

Increasingly, the trades shortages are going to be an issue as the nation rolls out the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

The new law will invest \$1.2 trillion in rebuilding crumbling roads, bridges, and public transportation systems. It will support advanced energy technologies and clean water infrastructure. It will expand digital service. It will modernize the electric grid.

The investments will create hundreds of thousands of construction and manufacturing jobs that pay decent wages and benefits for men and women in a variety of sectors.

And, all this will be going on for years, even as traditional manufacturers and businesses compete for those very same workers.

The situation demands that more younger people be trained early, so they can age into the ranks.

After many years of justifiably promoting vocation education, we took a left turn along the way when we should have gone right. Now, we're back going the correct direction. Let's see more of this newfound support.

Dennis Grubaugh is the retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.

Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center, a beacon of hope for both East St. Louis youth and city

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

In 1988 Jackie Joyner-Kersey had a dream to create a center that would be a safe haven, beacon of hope and portal to success



Ortbals

for the youth of the East St. Louis area. Through her foundation, that dream became the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Youth Center at N. 25th Street and Lynch Avenue in East St. Louis.

Kersey, of course, enjoyed phenomenal success in the world of sports starring in track and field and women's basketball at UCLA, winning 6 Olympic medals and being named the top female athlete of the 20th century by Sports Illustrated magazine. But she was born and raised in East St. Louis and says that none of that would have been possible without the local community center that helped guide her on a path to success.

Following her extraordinary athletic career, Kersey was determined to return to East St. Louis and provide kids with the

same kind of helping hand that she had received as a child.

The JJK Center uses a variety of sports and activities to attract kids but it's so much more than that. Kersey has developed a curriculum she calls Winning in Life that is incorporated into everything they do. It involves 14 life skills that she says are essential to success: confidence, courage, risk taking, critical thinking, determination, desire, dedication, commitment, goals, passion, self-respect, service, values and wellness.

The Winning in Life focus permeates the center's after-school, summer camp and sports programs that are provided for youth from 6 to 18. Participants are schooled in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education that includes architectural design and build, robotics, life sciences, physical sciences, and math. 98 percent of their participants graduate from high school on time.

Over the years the JJK Center has made a difference in the lives of thousands of East St. Louis youth but 2022 has been a particularly fruitful year as its success is now expanding beyond its boundaries.

In April, the Foundation launched the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Food, Agriculture and Nutrition Innovation Center (JJKFAN), a collaboration between the Jackie Joyner-

Kersey Foundation, the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Illinois Extension.

The JJKFAN will expand beyond STEM education to STEAM+Ag. STEAM adds creative thinking, imagination and design skills to the STEM curriculum and agriculture is included because it's been found that so many American children are ignorant about where their food comes from. A California survey of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders, for example, found that more than half of them didn't know lettuce and onions were plants; 40 percent didn't know that hamburgers are made from cows; and nearly a third didn't know that cheese is made from milk.

Nearly doubling the size of the JJK Center campus, the JJKFAN program will instruct students in genetics, molecular biology, plant pathology, food and agriculture science and image analytics. Centered around a 12,000 s.f. office building that will house JJK Foundation and Winning in Life staff, University of Illinois Extension Illinois Nutrition Education Program, and Danforth Center's JJKFAN staff, the project will include indoor and outdoor urban agriculture demonstration sites and space for youth and adults to participate in hands-on agriculture and nutrition education. It will

be located adjacent to and just west of the JJK Center campus.

And just last month, Gov. J. B. Pritzker announced that a site adjacent to the JJK Center has been chosen for the new district headquarters for the Illinois State Police District 11 serving Bond, Clinton, Madison, Monroe and St. Clair counties. The land that was donated to the agency by Lansdowne Up, a new East St. Louis nonprofit working to revitalize the community,

The new facility will feature two buildings: a headquarters of approximately 62,500 square feet and a roughly 21,000 square-foot warehouse. It will cost \$55 million to build and take three years to complete.

Other projects are also underway surrounding the JJK Center including a new subdivision of single-family homes. The JJK Center, once a dream, has indeed become a beacon and a safe haven--not just for the kids of the East St. Louis area, but for the city itself. None of it would have been possible without the leadership, determination, and hands-on involvement of Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

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