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**Commentary: No need to change 'voc-tech' admission policies**

* By Charles Chieppo and Jamie Gass

Massachusetts’ vocational-technical high schools are a national model, and that fact has never been more important than it is today. The federal infrastructure law enacted last year is expected to create 1.5 million construction jobs annually over the next decade. The Associated Builders and Contractors project that this year alone the industry will need to attract an additional 546,000 workers in addition to the normal pace of hiring to meet nationwide demand.

The industry has much to recommend it. As President Biden said in his State of the Union address, the trades offer “jobs paying $130,000 a year, and many do not require a college degree.”

Not only do those jobs offer high-paying careers without college debt, but thanks to the construction industry’s apprenticeship model, young people are actually paid to learn.

All this is why it’s so important to fully understand vocational-technical high schools and how they work before enacting the changes to their admissions policies sought in a recent complaint filed by Lawyers for Civil Rights.

In one sense, the complaint is a tribute to the schools’ success. For decades, poor and minority students were steered to vocational schools. Now it’s claimed that considering factors like attendance and interviews as part of the schools’ admissions policies is keeping those students out.

The Lawyers for Civil Rights complaint notes that only 55 percent of students of color are admitted to Massachusetts vocational-technical schools, compared to 69 percent of white applicants. The numbers are similar for economically disadvantaged students, who are admitted 54 percent of the time, while higher-income students are accepted at a 72 percent rate.

But taken in isolation, those numbers fail to give an accurate picture of vocational-technical high school admissions and student demographics. Voc-techs enroll a higher percentage of low-income students than the commonwealth’s comprehensive public high schools do. They also enroll nearly double the rate of special needs students.

Even more important is the effectiveness with which voc-techs educate those students. The schools boast a dropout rate of just 0.6 percent, a third of the rate in traditional public high schools. Among special needs students, the graduation rate is 24 percentage points higher than in comprehensive public high schools.

There are good reasons for the admissions policies at public vocational-technical high schools. It is a specialized form of education that isn’t for everyone. The schools feature an alternating curriculum — one week of shop followed by a week in the classroom.

One reason for the success of Massachusetts voc-techs is that students work with state-of-the-art equipment and machinery. This makes the schools far more expensive to operate than traditional schools. It costs an additional $5,000 per year to educate a voc-tech student.

Care must be taken in determining who operates such equipment. As David Ferreira, a former vocational school administrator and former head of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators said, “if you’ve got 15 kids with welding torches and somebody starts horsing around, you’ve got major issues.”

Taken together, all this means the schools must take steps to make sure its students are genuinely interested in and a good match for career technical education.

Another driver of Massachusetts vocational-technical high schools’ success is the close relationships they have with the local business community. Each school and each department have an advisory committee of local business leaders, which allows the schools to continually change and refine offerings to align with the skills area employers need.

In turn, the lure of a continuing pipeline of qualified talent leads employers to make generous contributions to ensure that the schools’ equipment remains up to date. This “virtuous circle” is critical, and both policy and judicial leaders should take care not to enact changes that might upend it.

A closer look at public vocational-technical education in Massachusetts reveals that the high schools deliver both excellence and equity. A recent complaint filed by Lawyers for Civil Rights threatens to upend that critical balance.

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