

OPINION // OUTLOOK

New academies with hands-on training a better fit than college for many Texas youth [Opinion]

By Joe Straus | March 4, 2020



Energy Institute High School robotics students Andrew Torres, from left, Javier Loredo and Rene Ramirez, work on building a robot in 2018.
Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

A growing number of high schools in Texas — 63 to be exact — now include six-year academies providing students groundbreaking technology careers. Among them are Avalos P-Tech High School in Aldine, Pathways in Technology at Willowridge High School in F schools in the Houston area.

These Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH) are helping tens of thousands of students across the state graduate or earn a valuable industry credential paired with hands-on training.

This is just one example of the growing reality around the state that good jobs require education and training beyond high school, but not necessarily a four-year degree. This educational approach was codified in 2013, when the Legislature moved schools away from a model that said every student needed to earn a bachelor's degree. That narrow focus on bachelor's degrees had proven ineffective for many students who could not afford or were not completing a four-year degree. At the same time, high-growth, high-paying jobs that required some postsecondary education but not a degree were going unfilled.

Significant progress has been made since that 2013 law, House Bill 5, was passed. But there is much more work ahead and it can oft programs in high schools and carry over to two-year colleges.

Demand for middle-skills workers in Texas — especially in high-growth fields like technology and health care — continues to vastly talent. Middle-skill jobs, which require more than a high school degree but not a bachelor's degree, account for 56 percent of our la percent of our workers are trained to that level. And demand is growing, with 50 percent of all job openings in Texas by 2024 estim: skill level.

As Robert Kaplan, the President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, recently told the Houston Chronicle that Texas could soon b disadvantage if young people who grow up here do not receive the education they need to succeed. The key is to make lasting inve including “a much more viable skills training option” in high schools, Kaplan said.

In other words, while providing students with better guidance about the many careers available to them is good for those students. way toward addressing the workforce and economic challenges looming over our state's future.

Schools should continue to expand the personalized guidance and exploration required by House Bill 5. It is especially important to complete exploratory programs in middle schools.

But career readiness is not just about changing curriculum. It's also about expanding ways students participate in hands-on learnin discover, refine and leverage their talents. Partnerships will be essential to providing opportunities for career exploration and post: high school.

The Dallas County Promise, a regional coalition of schools, colleges and nonprofits, launched last year with that idea in mind. The F scholarships and other support, focuses on reducing the mismatch between the fields local students pursue and the demand for ta

Upskill Houston, which provides information about career readiness and pathways, takes a similar approach to helping students se middle-skill jobs in oil and gas, advanced manufacturing and healthcare. In Austin, Eastside Memorial Early College High School has College of Health Care Professions (CHCP) to allow students to take classes on campus and earn college credit while also gaining in experience in health care fields. Graduates are able to earn industry-recognized certificates in less than a year to prepare for imme fast-growing sector.

As these innovative programs across Texas illustrate, educators and industry have taken major steps to help students better meet t our economy. But there is more that can and should be done, starting in Houston, which has taken its own steps to improve career There are plenty of examples around the state to follow, such as the P-TECH academies in the region and elsewhere, but it's import develop and implement initiatives that specifically work for their students and communities.

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