



# SAFEGUARDING

## Quality Chapter 74 Standards in Massachusetts

---

Massachusetts Association of  
Vocational Administrators

## Safeguarding Quality Chapter 74 Standards in Massachusetts

While Massachusetts continues to enjoy a first-in-the-nation reputation of educational excellence, discussions abound concerning strategies to improve educational outcomes, better prepare students for further education and future employment, and nurture the aptitude for lifelong learning necessary to keep pace with rapidly evolving technology. At the forefront of a national resurgence in career and technical education, several of the state's CTE systems have earned accolades for success in a variety of quality measurements, including high graduation rates, negligible drop-out rates, and significantly improved student scores on high-stakes academic exams. At the same time, labor market demand for workers with the technical skills required in high-wage, high-demand businesses and industry has called attention to the potential to meet that demand through vocational technical education.

It is fair and appropriate to recognize the multiple forms of quality Chapter 74 education found in the Commonwealth. Massachusetts is most fortunate to have a diversified menu of options; including urban, comprehensive, county agricultural, and collaborative partnership avenues, as well as its flagship network of regional vocational technical high schools. The recent positive notoriety of CTE has drawn many parents and students to favorably consider the vocational technical option and resulted in long waiting lists for the limited number of available seats in many Chapter 74 programs across the Commonwealth. Responding to this reality, many traditional high schools have increased efforts to add Chapter 74 programs to their course offerings. One of the challenges the leaders of these schools face, however, is to bridge the gap of familiarity with the high standards required for Chapter 74 labor training programs. Rather than simply defending the *status quo*, the challenge for state policymakers, DESE reviewers, vocational technical educators, and professional organizations like MAVA will be to expand CTE options further while protecting the integrity of the Chapter 74 approval process and the high standards and relevance to economic opportunity these programs must demonstrate.

Many of the state's older high school buildings, likely constructed in the 1960s and early 1970s, were to no surprise designed to offer traditional industrial arts and home economics programs of the day. It is therefore tempting for today's school leaders to consider the addition of career skills programs which can conveniently be offered within these existing facilities. Those industrial arts and home economics programs were intended to teach basic manual and life skills useful to all. Like career education, which is intended to expose students to career pathways, they had their purpose and function, but differ significantly from the more focused and concentrated mission of Chapter 74 vocational technical programs and curricula.

It is simply not acceptable to resurrect the industrial arts curriculum of the past and call it a Chapter 74 program - one is not the other. Neither is it appropriate to simply add whichever career skills program will most conveniently fit within the existing facility without ensuring there will be attractive job opportunities for those students who successfully complete the program. It is misleading to students if elective programs within a traditional high school are marketed as being equivalent to the Chapter 74 offerings at nearby vocational technical high schools when

those electives don't meet the rigorous standards set for Chapter 74 and respond to actual workforce demands in the region.

In order to comply with the rigor and standards of Chapter 74, schedule flexibility is imperative. Competing for a limited amount of each instructional day, large blocks of time are needed to master the competencies of any given Chapter 74 program. If a traditional high school commits just one period or one hour per day for career specific programming, that translates to a maximum of 180 hours per year, and 720 hours over the course of four years. Obviously, the total of program specific instructional hours would be less in any program which does not start in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This time commitment contrasts significantly with schedules of Massachusetts vocational technical centers whereby students in Chapter 74 programs earn nearly 500 hours of career specific training per year and close to 2,000 hours over the course of their high school experience.

While minutes alone do not define learning, allotting scarce time in the schedule for vocational technical learning reduces the magnitude of the task that each student can accept, often allowing each student to only complete a portion of a larger project. This results in no pride in the completion of the project and clearly diminishes the ability to foster the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of ownership and pride in one's work. The award-winning model of career and technical education as it is practiced in Massachusetts vocational technical systems today provides the larger blocks of time needed for desired results. Students are able to work from start to finish on a project, and the magnitude of that project is typically much larger than can be accomplished in shorter blocks of time. While most experienced career technical educators would advocate for even greater time on task, meaningful vocational technical education requires a minimum dedication of an 80-minute period, and preferably a full half-day, within each school day.

In recent years, special education educators have successfully advocated for a mainstream approach through IEPs and 504 plans, rather than the previous pull-out model which proved to be unintentionally discriminatory. As we now recognize and celebrate the new opportunities and success of our special needs students within the total population, it has become apparent that these students are now better prepared to transition from school to society. It would be unfortunate to now accept, or even advocate for, a pull-out model for Chapter 74 skill attainment.

The regrettable bias that vocational technical programs are for the less intellectually skilled has been clearly discredited by business and industry partners who confirm that they expect and demand high skill sets in the future workforce. Any Chapter 74 program that a traditional high school is considering should be marketed as an opportunity for all students, and not seen as simply recreating the track system that was prevalent fifty years ago.

Few can argue with the fact that there is a real need to increase the availability of career skill attainment for Massachusetts high school students, who represent the state's future workforce.

A recent report of MassBenchmarks, a journal of the Massachusetts economy published by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute in cooperation with the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, cites a shortage of well-trained workers for high demand jobs as a contributing factor in the slowing growth of the state's economy. The December 2016 *Benchmarks Bulletin* states "labor supply constraints will almost certainly become more of a drag on growth as time goes on and the retirements of baby boomers increase."<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists Katherine Newman and Hella Winston, in their 2016 book *Reskilling America: learning to labor in the twenty-first century*, convincingly argue for a re-energizing of the nation's vocational technical educational system by focusing on a combination of training, certification, and employer engagement.<sup>2</sup> They highlight the accomplishments of several Massachusetts voc-tech regions in Chapter 3, *The New Vocational Turn in American High Schools*, as they advocate for serious and rigorous vocational education which creates community and affords opportunities for students to gain real work experience through co-op placements or apprenticeships. They note, "Aside from the obvious fact that a serious and rigorous vocational education prepares students for a specific career path, there is a lot more about the process itself that, when done well, is beneficial for young people. For one, vocational students get to engage with adults who actually have ties to the industry they are pursuing..."<sup>3</sup>

Noting the need to address an increased demand for CVTE seats aligned to high-wage, high-demand industries, the Massachusetts DESE has recently made revisions to the Chapter 74 approval process designed to provide for a rigorous, expedited process which includes more technical assistance to districts and increased consistency in review and approval. If added career programs in a traditional high school are to yield the hoped for results, planners and DESE reviewers must be prepared not to sacrifice the integrity and rigor of Chapter 74. This means adhering to scheduling that will provide students with adequate blocks of time for meaningful career specific learning, ensuring instructional staff have the requisite Chapter 74 credentials, and committing to the significantly higher standards of the Chapter 74 curriculum. Additionally, the Chapter 74 requirement for advisory committee input should not be seen simply as an opportunity for business and industry to make monetary investments in exchange for a promise of future workers. The potential to benefit from the Chapter 74 advisory committee is not limited to gifting. The advisory committee's truest gift is its expertise and insight into current trends and workplace needs, and the motivation it instills to continually re-calibrate to ensure relevance to real world requirements.

---

<sup>1</sup>MassBenchmarks, *The Benchmarks Bulletin*, January 27, 2017, retrieved from: [http://www.massbenchmarks.org/publications/bulletin/70\\_bulletin\\_012717/index.htm](http://www.massbenchmarks.org/publications/bulletin/70_bulletin_012717/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup>Katherine Newman and Hella Winston, *Reskilling America: learning to labor in the twenty-first century* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2016) p. 208

<sup>3</sup>Newman and Winston, p. 63

In summary, Massachusetts policymakers who seek to improve the state's ability to meet workplace skill demands must advocate for the lens of approval for all Chapter 74 programs to adhere to strict and rigorous standards which cross reference economic opportunities and eventual job placement. No program should be approved simply because of political persuasion or influence, and existing programs within the state's CTE system should be subject to the same scrutiny and accountability expected of new programs within traditional high schools.

Respectfully extended,

Dr. Michael F. Fitzpatrick, on behalf of the Executive Committee of  
the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators