The Economist

Vocational training

Too narrow, too soon?

America's misplaced disdain for vocational education

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Learnt it at high schoo

SARAH ZANDER and Ashley Jacobsen are like many teenage girls. Sarah likes soccer. Ashley was captain of her school's team of cheerleaders this year. They are also earning good money as nursing assistants at a retirement home. Sarah plans to become a registered nurse. Ashley may become a pharmacologist. Their futures look sunny. Yet both are products of what is arguably America's most sneered-at high-school programme: vocational training.

Vocational education has been so disparaged that its few advocates have resorted to giving it a new name: "career and technical education" (CTE). Academic courses that prepare students for getting into universities, by contrast, are seen as the key to higher wages and global prowess. Last month the National Governors Association proposed standards to make students "college and career ready". But a few states, districts and think-tanks favour a radical notion. In America's quest to raise wages and compete internationally, CTE may be not a hindrance but a help.

America has a unique disdain for vocational education. It has supported such training si money now comes from the Perkins Act, which is reauthorised every six years. However Americans hate the idea of schoolchildren setting out on career paths—such predetermir they think, threatens the ethos of opportunity. As wages have risen for those with colleg scepticism of CTE has grown too. By 2005 only one-fifth of high-school students speciali industry, compared with one-third in 1982. The share of 17-year-olds aspiring to four-ye college, meanwhile, reached 69% in 2003, double the level of 1981. But the fact remain every student will graduate from university. This may make politicians uncomfortable, b catastrophic. The Council of Economic Advisers projects faster-growing demand for thos two-year technical-college degree, or specific training, than for those with a full universi

A growing chorus of state and local leaders argues that CTE can help. Rather than pit tra against university preparation, they are trying to integrate the two. CTE students may go university, to training or directly into work. The Perkins Act nudges such efforts forward, big shove comes from beyond Washington. Wisconsin's governor, Jim Doyle, has expan state's youth apprentice programme, which provides high-school students such as Sarah Ashley with jobs. Academic courses are complemented by those at technical colleges.

The most successful model, however, may be "career academies". Started in Philadelphi mimicked in California in the 1980s and supported elsewhere by Sandy Weil's National A

Foundation, these small schools combine academic and technical curriculums and give s work experience. When properly implemented, career academies can produce striking re non-partisan MDRC found that college attainment did not rise relative to a control group career academies did boost students' earnings by 11%. Among boys, earnings were 17% Young men were more likely to be married.

The challenge is to scale up such programmes. Within a sprawling high school in Chicag Rutter runs a small finance academy, teaching students about markets, accounting and p finance, welcoming executives and helping students find internships. Chicago's schools s this year said it would revamp its CTE system to mimic academies such as Mr Rutter's, r academic work with training for growth industries. California has pursued similar reform main champion is Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mr Obama should presumably push along such efforts. Last year he asked every America commit to at least one year of training, whether through a "community college or four-y school, vocational training or an apprenticeship". However, the governors' new standard emphasise academic skills. The education secretary's plan to reauthorise No Child Left B barely mentions CTE. Advocates hope this will change.

In the meantime, a bold new programme is inching forward. The National Centre on Edu the Economy (NCEE), a think-tank, is developing a test that students may take in their s year of high school. On passing, they could proceed to a community college or stay in h to apply to a four-year university. Those who fail would take extra courses to help them pilot programme, supported by the Gates Foundation, will begin in eight states next yea parents are already outraged by the imagined spectre of tracking. Marc Tucker, who lead NCEE, argues that a path to a community college might keep students engaged. Such a would provide students with more opportunity, not less.

United States