




# Joining Hands: CTE Programs Partner With Employers for Success

By **Nancy Mann Jackson**

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**H**igh school students studying health sciences in Montgomery, Alabama, receive the same hands-on training in reducing medical errors that is provided to working medical professionals in the city. Through a partnership with Baptist Health, students at Montgomery Public Schools' Health Science Career Academy undergo Synergistic Medical and Resource Team (SMART) training at the hospital system's Institute for Patient Safety and Medical Simulation. This training teaches physicians, nurses, medical students, respiratory therapists, paramedics and other healthcare professionals how to minimize errors through a combination of simulations and team building.

That corporate partnership is just one of many that helps ensure career and technical education (CTE) students in Montgomery receive education that is on the cutting edge of their fields of study. "It is imperative that local employers be involved in the development and planning of career academies because we want to

make sure students receive the academic preparation and technical skills employers in those industries look for," says Gibril White, director of CTE for Montgomery Public Schools. "We also want to make sure we are creating strong partnerships with industry to prepare our students for the world of work after graduation and increase their opportunities for networking and career mentoring."

As evolving technology and globalization constantly change industry needs and workforce requirements, it has become more important for CTE programs to work closely with local employers to ensure that classroom content matches workplace needs. In addition, "Industry professionals are more concerned with how curriculum is being designed because they want to ensure that the workforce is well prepared," says Andrew Rothstein, special advisor, educational policy at the National Academy Foundation (NAF), which operates a network of 500 career tech academies in 39 states. While the NAF model has emphasized corporate involvement since its founding in 1982,

Rothstein says that after 30 years of results, it's even clearer that working with employers—and working with them in the right ways—is vital for CTE success.

### Partnerships Benefit Students and Employers

When industry representatives and school personnel work together to design CTE curriculum, it helps the students “to understand the reason for learning,” says Pamela Avila, nurse educator at Health Careers Academy at Porterville High School in Porterville, California. “Students today do not take things at face value; they need purpose and understanding as to why this knowledge is important,” and they need to know how they’ll be able to use the information they’re learning in the future.

When schools and employers have opportunities to work together to plan for workforce needs, teachers receive valuable input from industry that allows them to

better prepare students to fill immediate needs. By designing curriculum or special projects together, teachers and industry representatives can not only prepare students to meet ongoing needs, but they can also “repair deficiencies” in the current workforce, Avila says. “This creates a win-win for all, most importantly, the student.”

From an employer perspective, working with schools pays off because collaborating gives future workers real-world experience before arriving on the job. “Business-world issues are not something you learn from standard textbooks,” says Tom Murphy, product manager at American Eagle Federal Credit Union, who has helped review courses for NAF schools. “The problems or challenges we face are more complex than the basics of technical learning.”

In addition to preparing students for the real-world problems of the workplace,

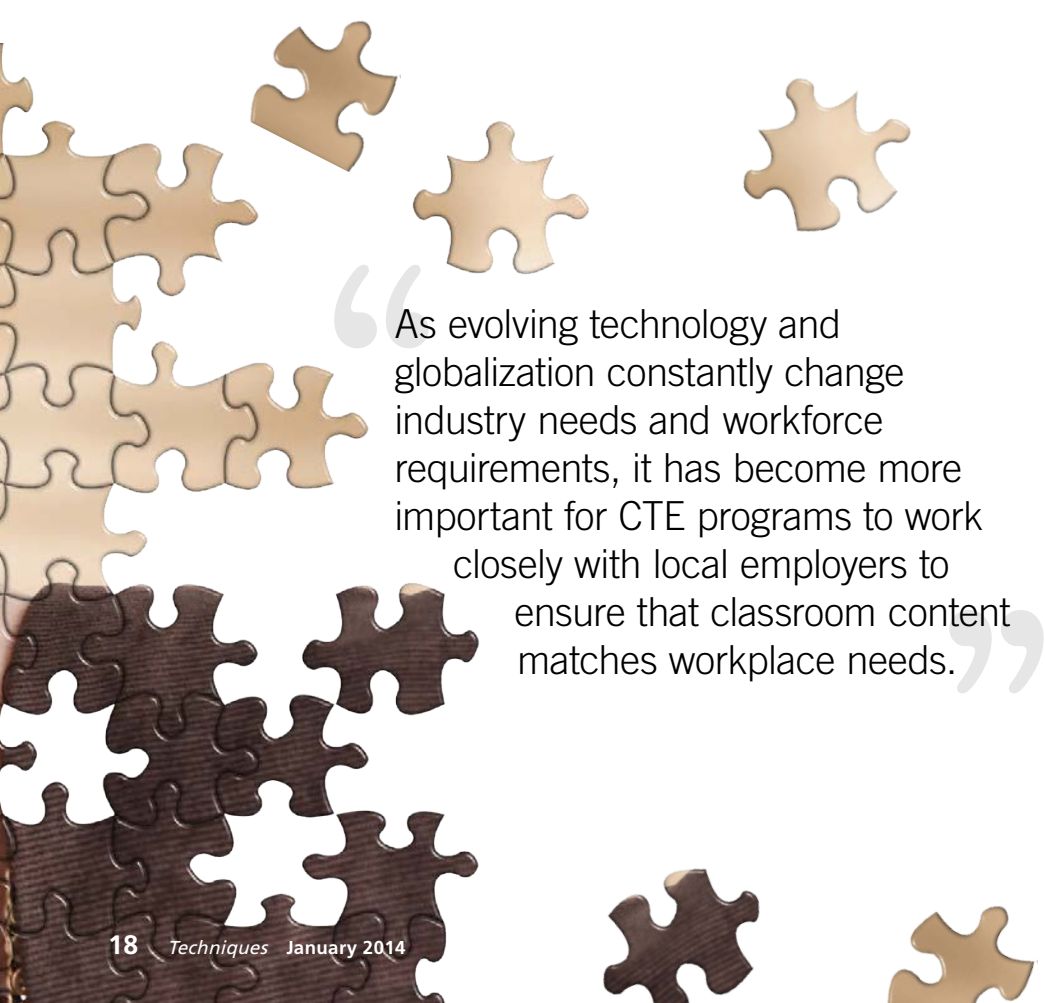
effective collaborations with schools can also help employers learn to better communicate with the next generation, Murphy says. For instance, companies interested in marketing to Millennials can include students in brainstorming sessions or focus groups to give insight into the products that interest them or the marketing messages that entice them, he adds. Such focus groups could also help employers learn more about how to effectively manage Millennial employees.

### How to Involve Employers

Even if schools and employers realize the value of building partnerships, structuring those partnerships in beneficial ways takes time and effort. In Montgomery, approximately 50 companies and organizations have partnered with Montgomery Public Schools’ CTE department’s seven career academies: Advanced Manufacturing, Hospitality & Tourism, Information Technology, Health Science, Teaching, Business & Finance, and Law & Public Safety. These partners include large local corporations such as Hyundai Motor Manufacturing, ALFA Insurance and Montgomery Biscuits, as well as regional banks, hospitals, restaurants, country clubs, hotels, museums, a U.S. Air Force base and the city’s police and fire departments.

For starters, White and her staff built an advisory board for each career academy, made up of industry professionals in the academy’s field of study. These board members “work closely with the academy teacher to ensure that the curriculum provides students relevant training, learning experiences and the high-demand skills employers in that industry seek,” White says. “Curriculum subcommittees are formed to review curriculum as industry needs change.”

To design NAF curriculum, Rothstein and his staff meet with similar “subject matter experts” who work in the industry, and ask questions that will guide the content development of courses. For instance,



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“We ask, ‘What knowledge and skills are important for your job?’ and ‘Which of those skills and knowledge are appropriate for high school students to learn and develop?’” Rothstein says. “We also ask specific questions about what these professionals do on a day-to-day basis, and we use that information to develop a project that replicates the kinds of behaviors they use at work.”

In addition to giving valuable information to inform curriculum decisions, partnerships with industry can bring great depth to a CTE program in other ways as well. In Montgomery, advisory council members provide students with paid internships, guest speakers, job shadowing, mentoring, mock interviews and field trips. They also provide CTE academies with equipment loans, financial assistance and grant writing assistance, as well as developing lists of equipment required by the industry.

### Keep Them Coming Back

While employers benefit from working with schools by helping to fill the workforce pipeline with qualified workers, districts must work to make the collaboration a positive experience for industry representatives. “It is crucial to make the experience for the employer straightforward, easy and respectful of their time,” Rothstein says. To do that, he recommends three best practices:

1. **Make it personal.** Rather than only spending time in meetings with CTE directors and curriculum developers, give industry representatives “opportunities to see and meet the students and teachers they are helping,” Rothstein says. Getting to know the students who plan to work in their industry one day will give industry representatives a greater sense of purpose.
2. **Recognize their contributions.** “Be sure to honor the in-

dustry representatives’ effort[s],” Rothstein says. “These are very busy people, and you want to make sure they know your school district appreciates what they’re doing.” Districts may recognize their industry partners with an annual lunch or dinner, a handwritten thank you note or a recognition page in the school yearbook or football program. Giving students opportunities to express their gratitude and share what they’ve learned can be especially meaningful.

3. **Find ways to connect the classroom and the workplace.** Ask professional partners for suggestions about the kinds of experiences that could take students out of the classroom and into their workplaces. Those might include site visits, facility tours, job shadowing and internships.

### What Success Looks Like

Effective partnerships between school districts and local employers result in better-prepared students who are more likely to be hired upon graduation, making for a healthier workforce and a stronger community. On a day-to-day basis, such partnerships play out in schools as active, authentic experiences that engage CTE students.

For instance, Montgomery Public Schools’ partnership with Max Credit Union resulted in the creation of a working branch of the credit union that is staffed by Business & Finance Academy students and is open once a week. “Students are gaining practical experience working as bank tellers, opening accounts, making deposits, cashing checks and honing customer service skills,” White says.

Through a partnership with the Montgomery Department of Public Safety and the County Commission, 10 students in the Law & Public Safety Academy

participated in paid summer internships, where they were able to work and learn about public safety operations in three law enforcement agencies. Students in the district’s Information Technology Academy have interned in the technology departments at local universities and IT companies, and have job shadowed professionals at various local employers.

At California’s Porterville High School, nursing students in the Health Careers Academy have a number of authentic career experiences before graduating, Avila says. Students go to a local hospital for an actual employee orientation program and partake in job shadowing and opportunities to become certified as first responders, certified nurse assistants, and pre-EMTs. Their training includes real-world experiences like spending time in an emergency department and labor and delivery department, and riding with firefighters and ambulance personnel.

Those experiences prepare students not only to land jobs in healthcare, but also to develop the presence of mind and helping reflexes required by good nurses. “I find that our students are not afraid to step up and help anyone they come across in need,” Avila says.

By joining forces with local employers, CTE programs can better bridge the gap between school and work. These partnerships allow the workplace to inform curriculum decisions and offer students authentic experiences to prepare them for their careers. ■

**Nancy Mann Jackson** is a full-time freelance writer with more than 12 years of writing and editing experience. She is also a former high school and junior college teacher. Nancy can be reached at [nancy@nancyjackson.com](mailto:nancy@nancyjackson.com)



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