



Students often limit their future because they are unwilling to seek a job beyond their small town or county line. Even going to a technical school located outside their district can be daunting for some.

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# CTE as a Lifelong Learning Portal

By Tracy Lassiter

**T**here is no typical day at Lenape Technical School in Ford City, Pennsylvania. On one day, for example, students could be absent because the bus cannot access their flooded county road. On another, a handful of learners might struggle with the schedule changes arising from a weather-related two-hour delay. Or maybe a student's sudden borderline academic scores prevent him from qualifying for an important cooperative work experience.

These kinds of challenges confront the Lenape Technical School students who come from a 600-mile radius in rural western Pennsylvania. However, the school's faculty, staff and administration regularly work to overcome them. Doing so could mean providing the students who have autism with a social story that explains what the delay means to the day's schedule. Or it might mean using an enrichment period, with the guidance of a teacher, instructional assistant or AmeriCorps member, to tutor the borderline student so that he can keep his co-op qualification.

Lenape is by no means the only institution facing issues related to funding, standardized testing and industry requirements. But add to these the difficulty of being located in a generally impoverished rural area, and well, the logistics certainly become more complex.

Unaddressed, these challenges easily become impediments to the students'

future success. However, if rural career and technical education (CTE) centers like Lenape situate themselves as supportive educational hubs, these challenges instead become mere hurdles, not barriers. Furthermore, rural CTE schools that position themselves as learning portals could help break the poverty cycle so many of their community members face.

## Numbers, Please

Lenape's current student enrollment is 560. It accepts students from four counties, and the statistics for its surrounding region are telling. According to the most recent data available from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2014), among rural Pennsylvania households, approximately 39 percent had incomes below \$35,000. Moreover, U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that Armstrong County ranks 33rd out of 67 counties in terms of poverty, with an overall 13 percent poverty rate (Index Mundi, 2015). This figure means 19.7 percent of the county's children live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), which has real educational consequences.

Several studies<sup>1</sup> link poverty's impact on children's brain development to their ability to learn. While schools cannot counter every socioeconomic factor that affects student learning, they can equip learners with tools to succeed despite them. For example, Lenape gives students the opportunity to develop life skills they might not otherwise learn, such as taking

them to the city to ride the subway or to practice etiquette at a dinner. The former is useful so that students see they *could* navigate a new place that is different from their small-town home; the latter is a skill students might need as part of a job interview. These are not typical experiences for most schools to provide, but as Carla Thimons, Lenape's special programs coordinator, explains, "Whenever someone asks what we do at Lenape, the answer is, 'We get the job done,'" whatever it may be. Furthermore, those are skills the students will use throughout their lives, and not solely to graduate.

Getting the job done also means providing basics, not just peripherals. Students sometimes need assistance arranging or getting to doctors' appointments or social service agencies. Alternatively, they might not be able to afford shop uniforms or graduation caps and gowns, so grants and donations are solicited to provide these materials. Helping students in this way "offers a hand up, not a handout," says Thimons. "Our strength is that we will do anything to help a student. We'll find a way."

## Location, Location

Rural CTE centers know too well the logistical difficulties of getting students to school every day. Additionally, those difficulties directly and indirectly limit student success. They directly limit success because they preclude students from staying after school for tutoring,

for example. But indirectly, there's the "county-line" mindset that perhaps other rural CTE centers, but certainly Lenape's administrators, must fight. Students often limit their future because they are unwilling to seek a job beyond their small town or county line. Even going to a technical school located outside their district can be daunting for some. "While in most cases this presents a unique opportunity for students, there is always a percentage who struggle and become extremely anxious," says Dean of Students James Purtell. "We help them get over the change of environment."

That anxiety also means teachers and administration must encourage students to think more broadly about their future. Principal Karen Brock concurs that this mindset is difficult to overcome. "We have to convince them to travel; they lack that knowledge and vision," she says. The concept of working beyond town borders "is not in their families or local communities." Industry members willing to serve as mentors could play a part in changing that thinking, says Brock.

Meanwhile, CTE centers can foster a broader view through activities like field trips and job shadowing. Job shadowing is a graduation requirement at Lenape, and the administration encourages students to visit as many industries as possible. Recently, students from three technical programs, their teachers and the business manager of the Armstrong County Department of Economic Development participated in a Manufacturing Day event, which included field trips to school industry partners BelleFlex Technologies, LLC, and Sloan Lubrication Systems. "These and other programs help us to pave a new path to progress for all stakeholders," says Dawn Kocher-Taylor, Lenape's administrative director. She adds that much of the students' education revolves around the school's ability to establish and maintain such partnerships.

### Of Academics and Opportunities

Another option rural CTE centers might consider is offering academic *and* technical courses. "Segregating academics from technical education is a bad move," says James Denova, vice president of

the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation. Instead, he says, the model to strive for is one that integrates industry knowledge with traditional training. Namely, having students in one location limits the time they're disrupted from learning by being on a bus. "That's part of the solution" to rural CTE student success, he says.

Denova also encourages more integrated collaboration with industry partners, pointing to several West Virginia technical schools that implement simulated workplaces in industries like energy or trucking. He adds that CTE centers like Lenape that offer academics, as well as technical courses, "should be recognized" on the same level as magnet schools. At Lenape, academic courses meet state and Common Core standards.

Furthermore, Lenape faculty often integrate academics and technical subject matter to ensure realism and to boost comprehension and retention. Last year, two teachers combined trigonometry with a Law Enforcement Information Technology class blood-spatter analysis

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activity. “Comprehension is a strength,” adds Brock. “The academic and technical teachers working together allows them to reinforce what [the students] are learning.” The students understand, too, why certain subjects are required for their program in the first place.

The value of CTE centers, rural or otherwise, is that “students have an opportunity to learn a trade that they wouldn’t be able to get because they couldn’t afford college tuition,” says guidance counselor Michelle Ligus. If they graduated from a regular high school, they would have to find a way to pay for additional schooling later. Instead, students who complete a CTE program have an advantage. For example, Ligus mentions two Lenape Tech precision machining students who intend to become mechanical engineers after high school. She notes that one already has a job offer and a promise from the employer that it will provide tuition toward an engineering degree.

Yet, parents should realize that not all students need a four-year degree, adds Brock. “Students can get an associate degree and with their trade be extremely successful.” CTE programs that prepare students with soft skills, as well as trade knowledge, prepare them for success.

## A Hub for Lifelong Learning

Many students do, however, want to pursue further schooling. “Postsecondary education, especially a community college aligned with industry standards, is the secret sauce,” says Denova. “Any opportunity for this alignment is ideal.” He was speaking generally about CTE centers, but he was pleased to hear Lenape now offers this opportunity via its recent collaboration with Butler County Community College. The NexTier Adult Learning Center (ALC) doubles as the off-campus site of the college, where students can earn associate degrees in General Studies, Psychology, Business Administration or Applied Science in Technical Trades.

The college’s location—next to the high school—is significant. According to the *Rural Policy Matters* (2014) article “Rural-Urban College Completion Gap,” rural residents would like to pursue postsecondary studies, but they often lack access

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to them. “Increasing access to higher education, especially four-year degree programs, is an important economic development strategy for rural communities” the article states. Thus, rural CTE programs that can provide access to postsecondary education position themselves as learning hubs, playing an instrumental role in breaking the cycle of poverty many residents face.

The ALC offers other courses to benefit the region. The center runs the New Choices Career Development Services program (and its offshoot pilot program, Project GROW), which provides free career development courses for workers in transition. New Choices enrollees learn job-seeking strategies like resume writing and interviewing skills. Project GROW will offer a similar curriculum, one targeting low-income families, especially mothers, so that they can reach financial independence (2015). These programs enable participants to take the first steps toward high-demand jobs that could support a family. And with such programs, CTE centers become sites of lifelong learning, a role that’s vital to any area, impoverished or not.

## Dreaming Big

Brock hesitates to use the “It takes a village ...” cliché to say how important parents, community, industry and other partners are to student success, yet cite it she does. She believes that it takes this combination for students to feel that their lives have been positively influenced during their journey to their chosen careers. While Lenape faculty, staff, administration and industry partners offer that support, alone they can only do so much. Yet by sharing ideas with other rural CTE centers, as well as serving as lifelong learn-

ing hubs, they can tackle those hurdles and continue to facilitate student success.

### Tech

**Tracy Lassiter** started working at Lenape Technical School as an AmeriCorps member through a six-month pilot program. She continues to work there as a substitute teacher and homebound student instructor. E-mail her at [lasstra@lenape.k12.pa.us](mailto:lasstra@lenape.k12.pa.us).

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## ENDNOTE

1. Studies referred to in the writing of this article include “How Growing Up in Poverty Rewires a Child’s Developing Brain” by Kayt Sukel (<http://magazine.good.is/articles/socioeconomic-status-and-literacy>); “Association of Child Poverty, Brain Development, and Academic Achievement” by Nicole L. Hair, Ph.D.; Jamie L. Hanson, Ph.D.; Barbara L. Wolfe, Ph.D.; and Seth D. Pollak, Ph.D. (<http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=2381542>); and “The Impact of Poverty on the Development of Brain Networks” by Sebastián J. Lipina and Michael I. Posner (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3421156/>).