



Munroe: Complete education includes real world

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"As California and the nation wrestle with the vitally important debate on education reform, businesses know that career relevance must be incorporated into the classroom."

Can California Compete?

-- America's Edge, May 2011

California faces a serious skills gap. The problem is not just about the shortage of graduates in the so-called "STEM" areas (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), it is also about a shortage of middle-skill workers. Examples of middle-skill jobs include carpenters, plumbers, dental hygienists, medical lab technicians, computer support specialists and legal secretaries. These jobs require more than a high school education but not necessarily a four-year college degree.

The seriousness of the problem becomes clear when we consider that nearly half of California jobs require

middle-skills training while only a third of the workforce is trained for middle-skill jobs.

The answer to this job crisis lies in Linked Learning. It is an approach to education that integrates sound academics with a career-oriented technical education and work-based learning experiences during the last three to four years of high school. Students can opt for fields such as health care, biomedicine and engineering, and prepare for careers via a full range of options that include community colleges, four-year colleges, apprenticeships, mentorship and internships in businesses. The success of Linked Learning programs in California was well-documented in a May 2008 report from ConnectEd -- the California Center for College and Career at UC Berkeley.

The Digital Safari Academy illustrates how a Linked Learning

program works and how it prepares students for 21st-century jobs. Established in 1996, the Digital Safari Academy at Mount Diablo High School in Concord provides a three-year program beginning in the sophomore year of high school. The goal of the Digital Safari program is the integration of multimedia design with core academic curriculum and real-world experience.

Digital Safari students work toward mastery of skills in graphic design, desktop publishing, animation, interactive authoring, photography, sound and video production, 3-D design and presentation software. More than 90 percent of the Digital Safari Academy's students qualify as socially, economically or academically "at risk."

The success of the program has been very significant. Since 1996, Digital Safari has received many state and national recognitions including 20 awards at the California Student Media Festival and five statewide awards for the Multimedia Student of the Year. Recently, Digital Safari students took first, second and third place in a Bay Area-wide business plan competition.

Digital Safari students integrate their in-class learning with work experience via design projects for local businesses, nonprofits and other community organizations. More than 500 students have graduated from the Digital Safari Academy. Almost all have chosen to continue their

education beyond high school, choosing state and community colleges, graphic arts schools and technical schools. Digital Safari graduates often report that they are much more confident and are more successful in college as a result of their real-world work experiences.

In recent conversations with Amy Anderson, coordinator of workforce development at John Muir Health, a major partner with several of the Linked Learning programs in the East Bay region, I was impressed with the extent of John Muir's involvement and success:

- John Muir Health today partners with the Health and Bioscience Academy at Mount Diablo High to support professional development and career exploration. In the spring semester, academy students participate in eight-week internships in various departments of John Muir hospitals.
- John Muir also hosts students from the International Hospital and Tourism Academy of Mount Diablo High as interns in their hospital kitchens.
- John Muir also provides multimedia design and IT internships for Digital Safari students in its information technology department.

The successes of John Muir Health's partnership programs with the Health and Bioscience Academy at Mount Diablo High have been significant. A

survey of the Health and Bioscience Academy over the past two years shows that as a result of the partnership with John Muir, 96 percent of the academy's students had increased awareness of health care careers.

Linked Learning programs increase students' engagement in school and help decrease the dropout rate. For example, nearly 100 percent of the

students in the Mount Diablo High School's Health and Bioscience Academy have gone on to postsecondary education -- remarkable success in a high school with a less than 70 percent graduation rate.

If we are serious about closing California's skills gap we should embrace Linked Learning programs in our high schools.