

John Minkler: Calling our students to action is win for them and community

April 3, 2014 Updated 12 hours ago

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/03/3858998/calling-our-students-to-action.html?sp=/99/274/>

There are many ways for schools to improve career education for Central Valley students, including more high quality STEM and vocational classes. We also need to address the achievement gap, with higher dropout rates for African-American students (34.3%) and Latino students (26.8%), according to the state Department of Education. Many dropouts indicate that they would have finished high school if classes were more relevant and connected to their community. Engaging students in solving community problems reaches those potential dropouts and provides powerful career education opportunities.

The Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership (ACEL) charter high school emphasizes the application of knowledge and skills through project-based learning and service-learning. Teachers guide students to solve interesting problems, examine key questions, address civic issues and explore career opportunities.

"Research shows that students who participated in service-learning activities in high school were 22 percentage points more likely to graduate from college than those who did not participate, and that civic engagement activities raised the odds of graduation and improved high school students' progress in reading, math, science, and history," according to the authors of "Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools."

Students are learning they will face challenges of global competition, automation and threats to sustainability. Business leaders tell us that the 21st century work force must be able to communicate effectively, apply knowledge, collaborate and engage in creative problem solving.

Learning these skills requires classroom instruction and real world experiences in which student teams engage with community leaders and mentors to solve problems and improve our community. The ACEL project-based learning activities offer students these opportunities:

Students volunteer with Fresno Habitat for Humanity to survey residents, support community events and build a playground in a high poverty neighborhood in southwest Fresno.

Environmental science students volunteer for Green 360 Careers, a partnership with WestEd and PG&E. Students map and share information on emerging green jobs, using a graphic information system. Two students presented this project at the California Geographic Association Geospatial Summit at UC Merced.

Physics class students work with PG&E advisers to learn to do energy audits for their school and downtown businesses.

The tribal chair of the North Fork Mono Tribe leads ACEL student volunteers to work on native plant and watershed restoration projects on the San Joaquin River.

The Youth Sustainability Council supports the Farm Grown Program of the Fresno Grizzlies Community Fund. Students built a vegetable garden in Chukchansi Stadium and give tours to show fans how they can grow food at home. This spring they will add fish farming to the Grizzlies Garden.

"Next Stop" is a book of personal stories in poetry and prose published by the creative writing class.

The ACEL Save Your Life team produced four videos to inform teenagers about the dangers of alcohol and drugs. With a grant from the California Health Collaborative, the Hip Hop Dance Class is writing and will perform two plays with a message of avoiding alcohol and drugs.

New Line Media Productions provided Web development services. The team worked with a professor at Fresno State to create a website for the new Fresno urban civic education minor.

The social, emotional and civic skills learned in these projects are often ignored in traditional career education classes. This innovative approach engages and motivates students who are not already on track for a successful career. Their connections to businesses like PG&E and the Fresno Grizzlies and community organizations like WestEd and Habitat for Humanity give them opportunities to experience real jobs and gain the confidence to plan career pathways.

One of our greatest responsibilities is to prepare the next generation for careers that will address the complex challenges of the 21st century. This requires both traditional career education and innovative programs that engage students who need social, emotional and civic skills through community service and career exploration projects. We must find ways to steer the 30% of students who are dropping out to constructive career pathways.

John Minkler is project coordinator of ACEL, a public high school chartered by Fresno Unified. ACEL recently won the Civic Learning Award of Distinction from the state Department of Education and the California Judicial Council. For information about ACEL, see the website (www.acelfresno.org) or email jminkler@acelfresno.org