

The Economic Vitality Formula of Success



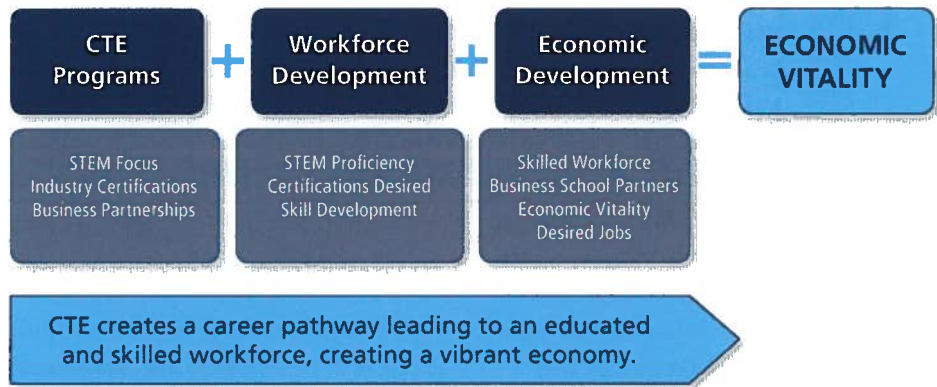
By Patrick Konopnicki

It's a rare day when economic developers are not thinking about ways to facilitate economic vitality in their area. Even successful communities are not guaranteed perpetual economic health—not amidst the forces of globalization, intraregional shifts of industries within the United States, and the inevitable life cycle of business enterprises. An economic vitality formula of success can be accomplished by creating partnerships between local career and technical education (CTE), and workforce development and economic development entities. Student industry certifications; dynamic partnerships; programs and projects focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); and shared talent among agencies can also be part of the success formula (Figure 1).

With a new CTE mandate from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the April 2012 U.S. Department of Education report, "Investing in America's Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Career and Technical Education," can easily become a catalyst for CTE re-invention and a perfect opportunity to take advantage of what already exists in many CTE programs. The formula for success can be a "low-hanging fruit" scenario where local CTE administrators showcase their best CTE programs and try to correlate with economic development and workforce development needs.

In June, while talking to Jerry Stewart, the CTE General Advisory Council chairman, who is with the city of Virginia Beach's Department of Economic Development, about what works for both the city and the schools of Virginia Beach, we came up with the formula for success as a means of explaining potential partner-

Figure 1: The Economic Vitality Formula of Success



ships between CTE programs, workforce development and economic development. As a team, we have long wondered why other cities and CTE offices have not made the connection between CTE and economic development. Granted, we have been working on this for almost 20 years, but devising the formula may not be as hard as one might think.

The connection between CTE and economic development first became obvious to me more than 20 years ago when I was principal of a regional technical center. The economic development director of the city of Hampton, Don Maxwell, pulled up to the school with a busload of legislators wanting to see our CTE facility in action. From that point forward, a relationship was formed where CTE became a star in the crown in the city of Hampton and a reference point for legislators.

Fast-forward years later to my current position as CTE director in Virginia Beach. One of the first joint projects completed in partnership with economic development and the local community college was the Advanced Technology

Center completed in 2002. This 137,000 square foot facility houses Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) classes in engineering/manufacturing, information technology, telecommunications, marketing, community college classes and training space for economic development.

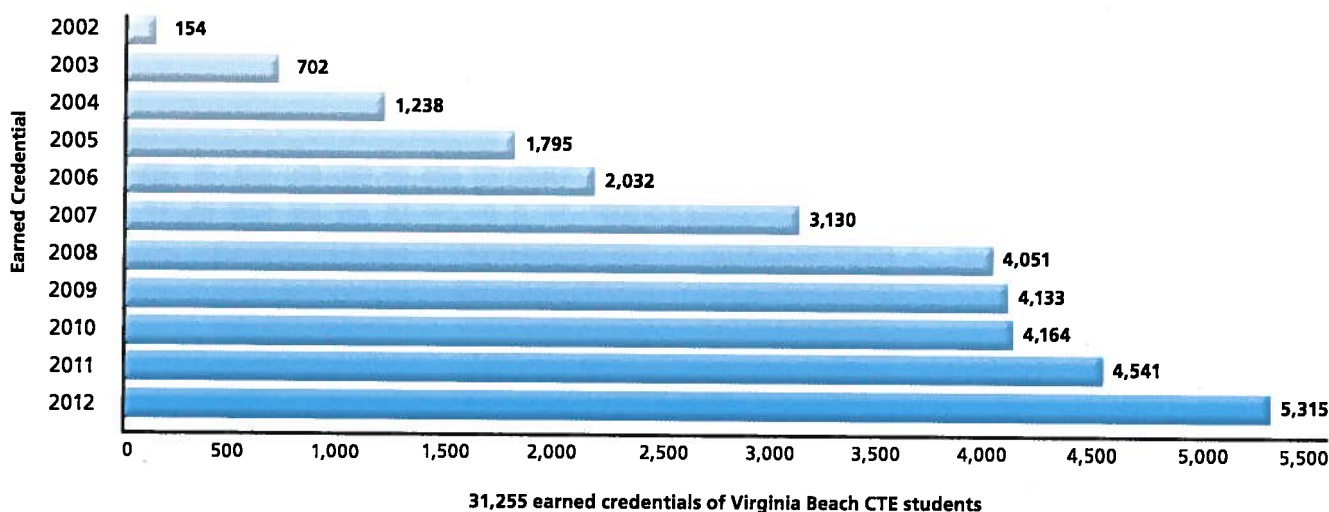
Strategic Planning

An example of the opportunity to connect CTE and economic development can be seen in Virginia Beach City's Economic Vitality Strategic Plan. Being a member of the city's Economic Vitality Strategic Issue Team, I was able to give CTE a voice in the plan. We were able to make the connection with the VBCPS' STEM initiative and the city's economic vitality STEM strategy and objective, and now it is part of the city's strategic plan. It was simply a matter of connecting the dots. For instance, the city wanted STEM-related jobs, and the school division wanted STEM career pathways. The strategic plan was a perfect match.

The following CTE-related objectives can be seen in the city's economic strategic plan:

PHOTO COURTESY OF STODOL.COM/PHOTODISC/PHC

Figure 2: Number of Industry Credentials Earned by VBCPS CTE Students from 2002–2012



- Initiate the effort to recruit STEM businesses by facilitating and encouraging the city and schools to develop a STEM strategic plan.
- Develop a Virginia Beach skills development model for career opportunities in the manufacturing sector.
- Develop a marketing plan for the Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth credential.
- Engage the business community to determine if the skill level of the current and future workforce meets their competitive needs.

Another example of synergy is a decade-long credentialing emphasis by VBCPS. A major goal of the Virginia Beach City Public Schools' Office of Career and Technical Education is to have all CTE graduates obtain at least two industry certifications—a course content certification and Virginia's Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth credential. For the last several years, the city's Department of Economic Development has sent letters to all CTE graduates who obtained the latter credential. As of July 2012, results indicate that 2,173 students earned this credential, more than in any other Virginia school division. In Virginia Beach, we operate on the foun-

dation of a strategic plan that is dedicated to developing 21st-century skills among our graduates—skills such as communication, collaboration, critical and creative thinking, and innovation. Our CTE program, with its emphasis on credentialing, has always been ahead of the curve in its efforts to prepare students for college and the workplace. Besides the technical, industry-specific skills, our CTE staff works diligently to ensure that our students understand the importance of the more intangible skills like work ethic and punctuality. "We want our graduates to be the total package for potential employers," says Superintendent James G. Merrill.

This credentialing effort became an easy link to the Virginia Beach City Strategic Plan under the Economic Vitality team's STEM strategy and objective to increase business awareness of this graduate skill focus (Figure 2).

Six Degrees of Separation

I remember posing a question to the Virginia superintendent of schools at a state conference: "Why don't other cities and career and technical education offices in Virginia make the CTE-economic development connection?" He responded that not everyone has the relationships that I

had built in Virginia Beach. Unfortunately, we did not get a chance to expand on the conversation, but I wonder what prevented other CTE colleagues from taking the time to connect with potential like-minded friends in economic development? Country-wide, localities have STEM-related CTE programs and city offices that focus on economic development. Career and technical education serves to advance a city's economic development efforts.

The current national focus on CTE and STEM can provide many partnership opportunities. For example, over the last several years VBCPS has had a STEM emphasis. In 2011, led by the Office of Career and Technical Education, we expanded our STEM Robotics Challenge to include several hundred K–12 students from 22 schools. Word spread and the VBCPS slogan, "Robots Rock and STEM Rules," caught on. This year in June, citizens, parents, teachers, administrators, business partners, economic vitality team members and business leaders all came to the robotic challenge event to support STEM robotics, further emphasizing STEM career pathways for students. Helping to sponsor the challenge were local manufacturing, electronic and military partners. One of those partner companies, STIHL Inc., a major sponsor,

brought other businesses to support the STEM Robotics Challenge event at the city's beachfront convention center. As of this publication, more than 50 Virginia Beach schools will be involved next year, with a record 25 elementary schools participating.

Workforce Development Opportunities

The Hampton Roads Workforce Investment Board has for some time had a strong strategic focus for students. In 2005, the VBCPS Office of Career and Technical Education, in cooperation with and receiving financial support from Opportunity Inc., the workplace investment board for South Hampton Roads, wrote a turnkey curriculum for high school CTE students to learn Virginia's workplace readiness skills. Last year Opportunity Inc. decided to make grants available for local school entities having a STEM emphasis. Virginia Beach schools not only created the opportunity for eligible students to participate in the STEM

Robotics Challenge, but they also forged a partnership with a local university to devise an online, 3-credit college STEM 101 course that would be available to Opportunity Inc. eligible students. Students learned chemistry, computers, physics, calculus and nanotechnology. Several seniors are going on to attend major universities with the intention of pursuing STEM careers.

Mechatronics Partnership

Another great example of how the economic vitality formula of success is working is mechatronics. Local Virginia Beach manufacturing CEO Sande Dukas of Controls Corporation of America has long expressed his concern to the Virginia Beach Department of Economic Development about the manufacturing talent shortage. Dukas sees a clear need for more mechatronics talent in the manufacturing workforce. His company manufactures precision gas control devices, and he would like nothing more than to have a workforce pipeline from local high schools, colleges and universities. According to Dukas, "The upcoming workforce of today has grown up using technology, and this talent and interest in manipulating machines can be directly translated to the needs of the high-performance manufacturer. If the K-12 CTE system can ignite the interest and passion for a high-tech manufacturing career path, high-paying and rewarding job opportunities will exist in the future." The partnership is between local manufacturers, local K-12 CTE systems, Opportunity Inc. and local higher education.

Refining the Formula

While there is no exact formula for success that will work in all localities, the economic vitality formula of success can be adapted almost anywhere. Warren Harris, director of the Department of Economic Development for the city of Virginia Beach, states, "As a city, we compete globally for business investment, and

what gives us a competitive advantage is the quality of our workforce. This clearly starts in the K-12 education system, with CTE taking the lead in the development of a tech-savvy workforce for our high-tech manufacturing sector."

It's generally agreed that few issues unite city administrators and local citizens in quite the same way as economic development does. Everyone wants to ensure economic growth and prosperity. All stakeholders understand that the "American dream" is fundamentally dependent on economic competitiveness. It also seems obvious that we all need to understand the rest of the equation: strong economies are characterized by a well-trained workforce. Overwhelmingly, well-paying jobs are held by individuals who have knowledge and skills obtained through training and education. While simple in concept, this formula for success serves to highlight some of the solutions that may solve the difficulties facing CTE administrators around the country.

By using the economic vitality formula of success, we can strengthen educational opportunities for students through expanded opportunities for CTE programs. CTE administrators and economic development professionals can assist policymakers in dealing with state education CTE issues through local data analysis and input. We have been able to foster cooperative planning locally, especially that which targets the sharing of resources and ideas. ■

Patrick M. Konopnicki, Ed.D., has been director of CTE in Virginia Beach City Public Schools for more than 20 years. He can be reached at patrick.konopnicki@vbschools.com.

Lessons Learned

- Connect with someone in economic development and workforce development several times a month.
- Stay in touch with your best business partners frequently.
- Ask the economic development, workforce development and business power brokers to be on your advisory council.
- Always ask the question, "How can I help your organization?"
- Think big, take action and expand on what is working.
- Don't get frustrated. It takes time to build profitable and meaningful business relationships.
- Recognize and celebrate successes.
- Reinvent what you do and be the pioneer.




Patrick M. Konopnicki will be presenting the 1-hour Idea Lab, "Economic Vitality Formula of Success: CTE + WFD + Economic Development = Economic Vitality" at CareerTech VISION 2012. For more programming information, visit www.careertechvision.com.