We live in an information age, dominated by global economic pressures and ever-evolving workplaces of unprecedented connectivity and complexity. Lifelong learning is no longer optional. It is a given in Wisconsin that educators must strive to prepare students to be college- and career-ready, meaning that students are challenged to master critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Students should be armed with academic knowledge, but also be nimble and adaptable learners with the skills to communicate, collaborate and apply that knowledge.

At the same time, Wisconsin is grappling with the workforce challenges posed by two colliding demographic trends — decades of lower birth rates and an outsized baby-boom generation on the cusp of retirement. Economists leave no doubt that we must educate as many of our citizens as we can — as well as we can and as quickly as we can — if we want to maintain our quality of life and economic vitality in the future.

In partnership with K-12 schools and future-minded employers, technical colleges are working to show young students that college is possible, and that challenging, high-paying careers are waiting for them right here in Wisconsin. Today’s K-12 students are fortunate to be served by a variety of strong educational partnerships that are tearing down silos in order to better serve students with relevant technology, rigorous instruction and critical-thinking skills. One critical component of those partnerships is dual credit, which brings together high-
schools and technical colleges to increase academic and economic opportunities for students. Despite its promise, a critical pillar of dual credit is under threat.

With more than 51,000 students enrolled at over 400 high schools last year, many people are familiar with dual-credit programs offered by Wisconsin’s technical colleges through a variety of models, including transcripted credit, Start College Now and special contracted services. Most courses are provided through transcripted credit, which is a revenue-neutral program taught by high school teachers and provides tech college curriculum. Families pay no tuition and students can transfer the college credits after graduation. Thousands of college-bound students use these courses each year to get a head start on the general education classes required for any associate or bachelor’s degree, saving themselves both tuition and time.

What the general public may not know is that the proven benefits for students go well beyond saving millions in tuition dollars each year. Dual enrollment also helps ease the transition from high school to college academics. University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Emeritus L. Allen Phelps led a study of Fox Valley Technical College’s dual-enrollment programs under a 2014 grant from the National Science Foundation. He found that students who had taken dual-enrollment courses in high school had higher rates of successful course completion their first year in college, demonstrated higher rates of persistence in their second year of college, and had higher college graduation rates compared to students who did not take dual-credit courses.

Of course, not all students enroll in college right out of high school. Dual credit can also serve those students’ needs. In 2018, Milwaukee Area Technical College partnered with Milwaukee Public Schools and Harley-Davidson to create a pilot program that provided a class of Bradley Tech High School students with an innovative early college/youth apprenticeship opportunity. Students went to high school, earned dual-college credits and then worked as paid toolmaking and industrial electrician youth apprentices. Students also explored other careers available at Harley-Davidson.

The pilot was so successful that the program rapidly expanded to provide 150 high school students similar experiences the following year. Following completion of the yearlong youth apprenticeship, students can choose to continue as registered apprentices after graduation. At Harley-Davidson, the new apprentices are earning $28 per hour right out of high school, with higher wages available once they complete the apprenticeship. The college credits these students earned in high school also count toward the classroom instruction required under the registered apprenticeship.

In the opposite corner of the state, Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College partners with 47 school districts — nearly all of them small and rural — to reinvigorate career and technical education programs and expand the available curriculum, including college-level general education courses. Despite a territory spanning 10,500 square miles and with relatively poor broadband penetration, WITC has been able to combine contracted services, transcripted credit and creative logistical strategies to make dual credit available to high school students throughout the region.

Programs are as varied as construction essentials, welding, certified nursing assistant, financial services and automotive maintenance. Every program not only qualifies students to go to work right out of high school, but also ladders seamlessly into programs leading to higher credentials at the college. For example, the CNA credential counts toward requirements to earn an associate degree in nursing, which in turn transfers into any of the state’s bachelor’s of science in nursing degree programs.

Economists leave no doubt that we must educate as many of our citizens as we can — as well as we can and as quickly as we can — if we want to maintain our quality of life and economic vitality in the future.
Despite the benefits, dual enrollment in Wisconsin is threatened by a change in enforcement of required teacher qualifications coming in 2022. The Higher Learning Commission is the nation’s largest regional accreditor, setting standards for colleges and universities in 19 central-region states. It accredits all public and private nonprofit institutions in Wisconsin, which qualifies them for federal financial aid programs, such as Pell Grants. HLC policy requires that high school teachers delivering college-level curriculum must have the same credentials as college-level faculty. For most non-occupational courses, that means a master’s degree in the content area being taught, or a master’s degree in another field plus at least 18 graduate credits in the content area being taught. Wisconsin’s technical colleges requested a delay in implementation of these requirements, but that waiver expires in 2022.

Based on survey information, these credential requirements will severely reduce the number of qualified teachers across the state and to ensure that dual-credit classes are available to all students, regardless of where they live and go to school. Technical colleges hope to partner with K-12 leaders and local...
stakeholders to identify policy solutions that make sense to school boards and teachers, as well as state-level policymakers. While the state Legislature provided some funding to cover graduate school tuition, not enough teachers are taking advantage of those dollars. Additional incentives are needed. One proposal, advanced by the Northeast Wisconsin Educational Resource Alliance based in Green Bay, would provide state funding for stipends for teachers who pursue graduate credits in order to teach dual credit. This could incentivize teachers for whom the old “lanes and steps” models no longer apply.

Local school districts may have their own strategies to address the issue, but time is of the essence. We hope you will join us in the effort to increase the supply of qualified dual-credit teachers and preserve opportunities in the coming years.

Layla Merrifield is the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association.

---

FLEXIBILITY

The Hartford Jt. 1 community approved a $5.495 million referendum for additions at two elementary schools to maximize student-teacher collaboration and interaction, and to create flexibility for instructional needs and future growth. This is Building Excellence.

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR K-12 SERVICES AT MIRON-CONSTRUCTION.COM