

Vocational Education

Nevada's K-12 educational curriculum emphasizes preparing students for advancement to higher education at the expense of preparing students for the job market.

Certainly, a college-preparation track is a necessary and valuable component of the K-12 curriculum. However, often neglected are the "forgotten half" of students who are unlikely to attend college.¹ For these students, formal training in a skilled trade that will provide meaningful employment upon graduation is the highest value the educational system can offer. Unfortunately, school districts in Nevada have been slow to attend to this demographic – leaving graduates unprepared for the job market.

Key Points

Most employers are seeking skills, not degrees. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, only 6.49% of jobs nationwide require applicants to hold a bachelor's degree or higher in order to be competitive. By 2031, this figure will increase only slightly – to 6.70%.² Possession of a postsecondary vocational credential accounts for an additional 1.4%.³

The proportion of Nevada residents holding degrees exceeds base employer demand. Despite the many problems with public education in the Silver State, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that 27.0% of Nevadans age 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher.⁴

At-risk students are most likely to excel in vocational education programs. With the lowest high-school graduation rate in the nation, Nevada's public schools suffer from extraordinarily high dropout rates. Research has shown that students suffering from one or more "at-risk" conditions have a more difficult time staying on task during academic activities and are less likely to graduate.⁵ However, these students have performed much better when enrolled in vocational training programs.⁶

At-risk students, such as those for whom English is a second language or whose parents did not graduate high school, are numerous in Nevada. This undoubtedly contributes to the state's historically low graduation rates. It also renders the inclusion of vocational programs into the educational curriculum even more important. It is better to prepare at-risk students for meaningful employment upon graduation than to allow their academic frustrations to result in higher dropout rates and reduced lifetime earning potentials.

Recommendations

Encourage systematic integration of vocational training into the educational curricula. To prepare many more students for success in the labor market, the Nevada Legislature should incentivize Nevada school districts to replicate statewide the highly successful model provided by Reno's Academy for Career Education (ACE High School) charter school. Enthusiastically backed by private-sector professionals, ACE cost-effectively integrates sound, professional career training into a rigorous academic curriculum – reflecting exactly the kind of reforms that have proven most effective in national longitudinal studies.⁷ The Lone Star State's Achieve Texas program⁸ can provide Nevada lawmakers and local groups with additional, highly valuable guidance – including a statewide career initiative model for the Nevada Department of Education.

¹ Robert Schmidt, "Teaching the Forgotten Half: Career and Vocational Education in Nevada's High Schools," NPRI policy study, 2006.

² U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections Program, "National Employment Matrix, 2021-2031."

³ Ibid.

⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2022.

⁵ See, e.g., Greg Druian and Jocelyn Butler, "Effective Schooling Practices and At-Risk Youth: What the Research Shows," Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, 1987.

Forecast Job Growth by Occupation and Educational Prerequisites in the United States (Numbers in Thousands)

Occupation	Employment change, 2021-31	Typical education needed for entry	Typical on-the-job training needed to attain competency in the occupation
Food preparation and serving related occupations	1,319.9	—	—
Healthcare support occupations	1,253.8	—	—
Home health and personal care aides; and nursing assistants, orderlies, and psychiatric aides	990.7	—	—
Home health and personal care aides	924.0	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Management occupations	883.9	—	—
Transportation and material moving occupations	861.8	—	—
Healthcare practitioners and technical occupations	795.3	—	—
Computer and mathematical occupations	764.8	—	—
Business and financial operations occupations	715.1	—	—
Computer occupations	682.8	—	—
Educational instruction and library occupations	658.2	—	—
Postsecondary nondegree	651.9	—	—
Healthcare diagnosing or treating practitioners	562.5	—	—
Food and beverage serving workers	549.4	—	—
Personal care and service occupations	544.8	—	—
Business operations specialists	516.2	—	—
Cooks, restaurant	459.9	No formal educational credential	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Software and web developers, programmers, and testers	439.0	—	—
Cooks and food preparation workers	437.0	—	—
Cooks	419.3	—	—
Material moving workers	417.7	—	—
Software developers	370.6	Bachelor's degree	None
Motor vehicle operators	369.6	—	—
Other management occupations	360.2	—	—
Laborers and material movers	350.8	—	—
Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	304.0	—	—
Community and social service occupations	294.6	—	—
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations	290.8	—	—
Counselors, social workers, and other community and social service specialists	275.5	—	—
Operations specialties managers	267.5	—	—
Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	265.1	—	—
Construction and extraction occupations	252.9	—	—
Fast food and counter workers	243.2	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Preschool, elementary, middle, secondary, and special education teachers	230.5	—	—
Other healthcare support occupations	217.7	—	—
Health technologists and technicians	216.4	—	—
General and operations managers	209.8	Bachelor's degree	None
Building cleaning and pest control workers	208.7	—	—
Other installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	206.0	—	—
Building cleaning workers	202.5	—	—
Financial specialists	198.9	—	—
Waiters and waitresses	197.0	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Construction trades workers	195.6	—	—
Registered nurses	195.4	Bachelor's degree	None

on Student Course-taking and Performance in English and Science,”

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “National Employment Matrix, 2021-2031.”