

Forum at MBIT addresses disconnect between education and workforce needs

By [Chris English](#)

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Educators, business people and others met at the Warwick school to discuss ways of better steering students into the careers they are truly meant for.

Educators, business people and government officials from throughout the area met Wednesday to talk about ways to better connect education with the needs of the economy and the workforce.

In a three-hour forum held at Middle Bucks Institute of Technology in Warwick, participants delved into the problem, what is already being done about it and more possible solutions. The event was moderated by officials from the Columbia, Maryland-based [National Center for College & Career Transitions](#).

Too many students are being pigeonholed into either “college material” or “not college material” categories without looking closely enough at each individual’s makeup and talents, NC3T President Hans Meeder said.

“Are we limiting options?” he asked. “Are we steering students away from college or into college when it’s often not the best pathway for that particular person? Are we asking 15-year-olds to get locked into a career decision?”

Everyone involved in a student’s development — including the students themselves — need to take a deeper and more thorough approach to evaluating the best career choices, said Meeder and NC3T facilitator Joann Hudak.

Schools and colleges in many cases aren’t doing an adequate job of teaching students what they need to know for the jobs they end up in, they added.

One of the results is a “skills gap” that has left many jobs unfilled in areas like electricians, plumbers and other trades, accounting, engineering, teaching, nursing and finance, Meeder said.

A survey by McGraw-Hill showed that 63 percent of college graduates felt they were ready for their chosen careers, but only 29 percent of employers agreed, he added.

Education can't occur in a vacuum, said Clara Console, president of a firm called Choice Careers that seeks to best match a student with a career.

"In my years of going to school, I don't ever remember a teacher mentioning the word 'job,'" Console said. "If we don't teach our teachers to talk about jobs, the kids won't get it."

Hudak added, "We have to do a better job of telling students how the things they are being taught will be used in the real world."

Among the many possible solutions for the education-work divide that came out of the forum were:

- more meetings, conversation and collaboration among educators and business people on how what is being taught in schools and colleges can better reflect the "real world"
- more collaboration between regular education and technical education professionals on the same subject
- more thoughtful and thorough evaluation and less generalization by education professionals and others regarding each student's talents and career aspirations

"It's not just parents, it's not just teachers. All stakeholders are responsible" for doing their part to fix the problem, Hudak said.

"If you don't have school officials collaborating with employers, you're never going to get these kids jobs," said Thompson Toyota Human Resources Director Jennifer May.

New Hope-Solebury school board member and MBIT Executive Council Chairman Stanley Marcus said everyone should foster in students an attitude of not being afraid to try different things.

"Kids need to go out and fail," he said. "I'm not saying let's create failures. I'm saying that failing gives people a better understanding of what they are not good at and helps them figure out what they are good at."

Steps already are being taken to correct the problems discussed on Wednesday, forum participants said. Meeder pointed out that at Bucks County Technical High School in Bristol Township, incoming ninth-graders explore all of the school's more than 25 vocational fields for an entire year before choosing one in their sophomore year.

“We have students coming to us in the ninth grade saying, “I want to be a plumber, or I want to be a carpenter or I want to be this or that,” BCTHS Administrative Director Leon Poeske said.

“We tell them, great, but first you’re going to spend a year exploring all of our programs.” By taking this step, less than 2 percent of our kids change programs once they find that pathway.”

Centennial School District Superintendent David Baugh said the district has implemented programs to better reflect the world students will face when they get jobs.

The school district has beefed up its science, technology, engineering and mathematics offerings in the middle schools, and has installed a mobile manufacturing lab where high school students make skis and snowboards, Baugh said. Students at the lab also learn about how to market the products they make, he added.

Next year, the district plans to implement mobile T-shirt factories at William Tennent High School and at a middle school, Baugh said.

“We’re encouraging students to make real decisions with real repercussions,” he said. “The need for kids to think about what they really want to do, and have real conversations with people in that industry, is huge.”