

## Opinion: Make Education Cheaper with High School Diploma Plus

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*Editor's Note: The following opinion essay presents an idea for school districts and community colleges to create a dual-degree program. It is intended to be the beginning of a conversation and the Jefferson Educational Society encourages readers to respond with their comments to Jefferson Publications Coordinator Pat Cuneo at [cuneo@jeserie.org](mailto:cuneo@jeserie.org).*

COVID-19 has created unprecedented uncertainty and mounting expenses for Pennsylvania's educational systems. This is on top of declining enrollments associated with population loss and rising costs. Luckily, some communities are drawing on their historical resilience to support public schools in innovative ways. They had better. Many schools already can't afford their rising costs. And more and more students can't afford higher college tuitions. Worse, many pandemic costs can't even be predicted.

There is no reason why, however, we can't think more cooperatively about networks that include both school districts and higher education, within and across regions. For those in Washington who are thinking about forgiving student debt, perhaps they could also think about lowering costs in the first place.

We need a plan B for when the pandemic money runs out. One option is a dual degree. This includes a high school diploma and a community college associate's degree. Both accredited. Simultaneously. Full degrees, not partial. Save two years. Benefit all concerned. Full stop.

Dual-degree programs are not new. What is new is the concept of a regional K-20 education network that can support the next generation of students. They sure need it. And it can help build the region.

Pennsylvania's model for dual degrees allows students to stay in their high school with their friends or work from home. Or not. Flexible design. This is important. The state's model could be particularly helpful for rural students because it could

reduce both time and transportation costs. We also can't forget the amount of time young people need to spend face-to-face with teachers and with each other. We are short on that these days.

For example, one creative solution for more complex dual degree programs could be for community college faculty to train qualified high school teachers with master's degrees to teach some (but not all) of the community college's courses. Together both faculties would share blends of both face-to-face and online teaching at a high quality.

This regional network could give everybody a chance to "win." There are a lot of young people who could benefit from a community college degree but just can't afford it right now, both in terms of time and money. Tapping into this pool can help build our regional economies. How?

Students can save money and valuable time. It could attract students who could not before have afforded to attend. Community colleges could broaden their recruitment pool, generate more credits and increase graduation rates. High school teachers could earn stipends, similar to athletic coaches as well as time off or other negotiated perks. The same could apply to community college professors who train high school teachers. Then, building on the dual-degree programs, four-year colleges and universities could build two-year connecting programs that could help increase enrollments and sustain quality.

For example, what about a dual-degree program in child development with dual certification as a paraprofessional in schools or in day care centers? A program like this could be developed with community colleges and paired with district schools or with career and technical education (CTE) schools. Students could graduate with certificates, begin to work, gain workplace experience and start to save for admission to a nearby two-year, basic teacher education program at a regional college/university. This way they could start teaching, get experience, and return to the regional college to work on advanced degrees. This is only one example of what might be possible with a dual-degree program.

Parents and students could save money on college tuition. Businesses could invest in specific programs that could give them access to more educated workers in needed areas. The region could win by investing limited resources into quality regional institutions that know how to share resources, like the collaboration with the new Education and Training Hub at the University of Pittsburgh's Titusville campus. All of this can help build needed tax capacity and save on taxes. And not forget the liberal arts. Regional networks could help generate revenues and show frugal innovation in their use of expenditures. School districts can improve their reputation and competitiveness. Colleges and universities could find new sources of enrollments.

It is time to take these models of "generational" regional education networks seriously. It has been too long. Almost 10 years ago, a disruptive superintendent at the time, Mount Union School District, Brett Gilliland, with board approval, formalized an existing and successful dual partnership with the Pennsylvania Highlands Community College. In addition, this regional network had been building with online vendors, a public university and a private one since 2000. The district expanded its curriculum by working with different vendors to generate multiple language, business, medical-related, and advanced placement courses. These options were in addition to the dual degree and other programs. Together,

this partnership created an ad hoc regional online network. This education network helped reduce costs, increase revenue and reduce tax increases by better managing scarce resources. It is worth revisiting a regional network model. Just think of all of the work in online networks that have been created over the past year. Why not pull it out, dust it off and try another use.

According to the community college president at the time, Dr. Walter Asonovich, “We are starting to see students probably whose families never sent anybody to college before, now thinking college is a viable option for them in terms of career and career goals.” Endorsements don’t get much better than that.

What made the dual degree work was active local cooperation across the district, the teachers’ unions and the community college. In other districts today, however, an old industrial culture of adversarialism still lingers. Isn’t it time to turn the page? In a reimagined dual-degree region, benefits could be generated in many directions by the cooperation that comes from smart trade. Of course, there will be problems to work through. Isn’t that to be expected?

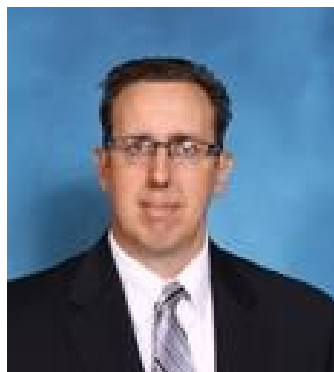
Of course, dual-degree programs can be extended to urban and suburban areas. That dual-degree program, however, was designed for rural areas. Erie County, for example, covers significant rural, suburban and urban areas. Fertile ground for expanding the idea. In addition, opportunities for creative regional development are opening up with both a new community college and the rich heritage of our higher education institutions. Why not reach for something that is both practical and ground-breaking?

It is now time to strategically invest in regional education networks that use the collaborative internet technologies of the 21st century to support educational institutions regionally. Together they may create competitively attractive educational opportunities for the generational benefit of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, its regional development and beyond.



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