



Maine South senior Brian Campbell completed an internship with the Niles Fire Department last spring where he participated in hands on activities working directly with the firefighters in the department.

# Re-examining Career & College Advisement

## Maine Township High School District 207

**By Dr. Ken Wallace, Superintendent  
Maine Township High School District 207**

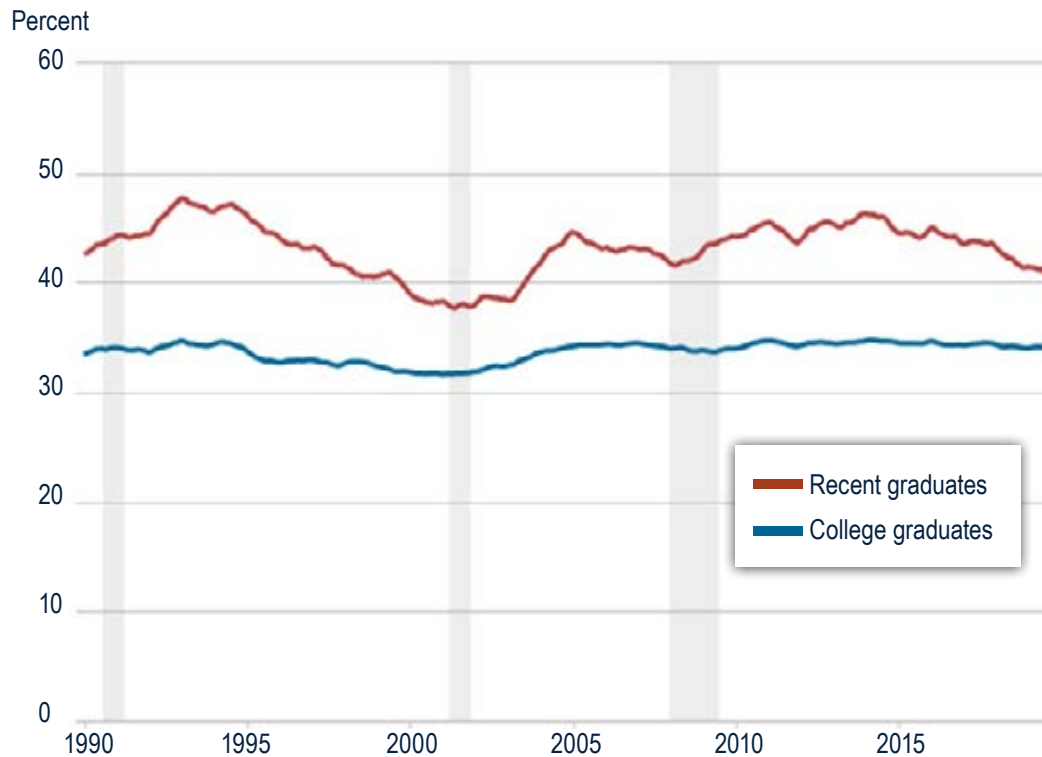
What if we've been wrong about career and college advisement in U.S. high schools? Recently, the *Wall Street Journal* published a piece that challenged the conventional thinking that has driven much of career design in high schools and colleges in America. The article, "Your Parents' Financial Advice Is (Kind Of) Wrong," unpacks the imprecise mindset of "college for all." Driven by the student debt crisis and employment and economic trends, the topic is suddenly gaining more traction in mainstream media and

within the consciousness of everyday Americans, including our students.

At Maine Township High School District 207, we have been paying attention to the U.S. macro data on student debt, underemployment, as well as jobs distribution for the better part of a decade, leading to a total redesign of our career advisement program. Previously, our high schools were designed to insure that students graduated on time and largely enrolled in college. Like most, our schools sent explicit messages that the path to success was

*continued...*

## Chart 1. Underemployment Rates For College Graduates



Sources: US Census Bureau and US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (IPUMS); US Department of Labor, O<sup>A</sup>NET.

NOTES: The underemployment rate is defined as the share of graduates working in jobs that typically do not require a college degree. A job is classified as a college job if 50 percent or more of the people working in that job indicate that at least a bachelor's degree is necessary; otherwise, the job is classified as a non-college job. Rates are calculated as a 12-month moving average. College graduates are those aged 22 to 65 with a bachelor's degree or higher; recent college graduates are those aged 22 to 27 with a bachelor's degree or higher. All figures exclude those currently enrolled in school. Shaded areas indicate periods designated recessions by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

primarily, if not only, accomplished through enrollment in and successful completion of a college degree. Federal legislation like the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* and the subsequent standardized test-driven push also contributed, helping close career and technical wings in high schools all over the nation. It happened in District 207; in fact my predecessor as the Assistant Superintendent in District 207 was on record in support of this push saying, "We aren't training plumbers after all."

Except, it turns out, we actually were. In recent talks on the subject, I tell this story and then play a video in which Matt Rioch, a 1995 Maine South graduate, appears and tells the audience that he is the owner of Park Ridge Plumbing, employs three licensed plumbers and is "Ken's plumber." This gets a nice laugh but underscores the folly of the thinking that led us here in the first place. Turns out that even with *NCLB*, indoor plumbing didn't go out of style, nor did electricity, auto repair, dental hygiene, cybersecurity and the *majority* of essential services that we forget are obtainable *without* a college degree, pay a livable wage and can be obtained without a mountain of debt. In fact, the *WSJ* piece highlighted what has been true for many years, especially during the *NCLB* era: a third to one half of all college graduates are underemployed, working in jobs that do not require a college degree (**Chart 1**).

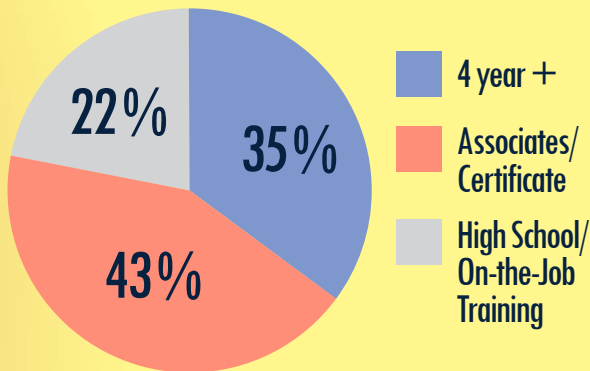
In the 2013–14 school year, District 207 started re-examining everything, including where jobs actually exist. District 207 wraps around the northeast side of O'Hare Airport in Chicago. Using data from the United States Bureau of Labor statistics, our District 207 Career Coordinator began analyzing jobs data and visualizing that data (**Chart 2**) for us to better understand the actual jobs picture. What does the evidence say? The majority of good jobs (jobs that exist *and* pay a livable wage) are in the space beyond a high school degree but *before* a four-year college degree. Jobs like Computer Numerical Control mill operator, electrician, plumber, welder and a host of medical professions. The list goes on, and these jobs are often unfilled because of the "one-way" career advisement that we've practiced. Our data mirrors the nations.

### The BIG Idea

*Project Lead the Way (PLTW)* courses have been taught since 1997 in American High Schools and more recently middle schools. Their program research has shown that students in *PLTW* courses are more likely to major in a STEM-related field and work in STEM careers. Because *PLTW* is a project-based STEM-focused curriculum, the theory is that students get to "try on" what the work really looks like while in high school. I asked this question of our team in 2014: "What if we tried to replicate that for every possible career in which our students had interests?" We then set out to do just that. This is a brief synopsis of our work:



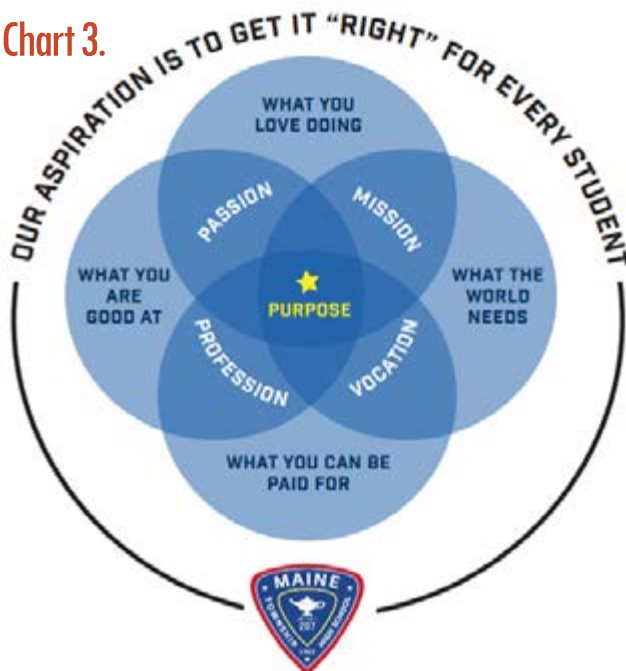
**Chart 2. Education Required for Top 100 Jobs in Maine Township**



Source: US / IL Bureau of Labor Statistics, IDES & EMSI data (December 2018)

1. Each student has an individual “career plan” that is part of our four-year checklist of career advisement and experiences that are all considered “Tier 1” (every student gets it) strategies. We expose students to a variety of career exploration opportunities, both through interactions with staff and also with a variety of “next generation” career software applications that have real-time jobs data to help students and families make better decisions. Our design thinking (**Chart 3**) is based on helping students find their “WHY” (passions, interests, dreams, strengths, big problems to solve) first before working on “WHERE” that happens. We believe, and are developing ways to study our work longitudinally, that if students can first find a match in a career field of high interest (we steer toward those with a livable wage) that they will persist on their education path, from certification to apprenticeship to college degrees.

**Chart 3.**



2. We hold ourselves accountable to our service to students. When we began this work we had 74 business partners. Today we have more than 600. Once a student has identified a career interest we work to provide a series of authentic career experiences in that field, preferably an internship. We have worked to be flexible in providing these experiences to make them work for our students and business partners. We want to provoke responses from students, including if a particular career is NOT for a student. We want students to find their own path. The work in this area is a big lift and is asking a research question that has likely never been asked to find an answer that doesn't exist: how many average iterative career experiences would we need to build to get to a 90 percent “match rate” for thousands of students over time? We don't know yet, but we are studying that question, for which we may not have an accurate answer until five or 10 years from now. We have added partnerships with a variety of professional trade groups as well to help develop career paths for each student.
3. Once a student and family is confident in the career match, we have analytic tools that help us provide “Return on Investment” career and college counseling. One of our tools, JobsEQ, allows us to search by zip code to find mean starting salaries in any career as well as growth projections. Using that information we are working with families to design a responsible education path for each student that seeks to get students to a career of high interest in as short an amount of time as possible in a cost responsible way.

Asking if we've been wrong about career and college advisement truly has led to transformative work in Maine Township High School District 207. Two of the three schools in our district are majority minority high schools, and I feel there is literally no greater work in equity than to change the trajectory of a student's life. That is especially true for traditionally under-served populations, and I feel our help will lead students to a good career that pays a livable wage, creating access to a better life not only for that student, but also for his or her children moving forward. It's also as central to the success of public schools and our democracy as it is to the lives of our students.

