

State's technical schools improve performance on tests

BY MICHAEL PUFFER REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY -- Using a powerful lens and sunlight, W.F.Kaynor Technical High School physics teacher Martin Sagendorf can cook a hotdog or melt a penny in seconds.

Sagendorf has a van full of gadgets, vacuum tubes and aquariums. But to get to the demonstrations, students must first read and comprehend lessons. Sagendorf said that's happening a lot quicker these days than when he first started teaching five years ago.

"That's a pleasure from my standpoint," said Sagendorf with a laugh. "And I think it's a pleasure for the kids."

Once thought of as academically lackluster, vocational students are quickly improving if the state's standardized test scores are any measure. According to results released last week, vocational schools have caught up with mainstream high schools in numbers of students meeting federal competency goals.

Given to 10th graders every year, the Connecticut Academic Performance Test measures math, science, reading and writing ability. If districts miss federal goals, sanctions can follow. For a second year of missed targets, a school might be required to offer extra tutoring. By year six, districts face possible state takeover.

That's not a concern for Kaynor in Waterbury or Oliver Wolcott Technical High School in Torrington, which, along with the entire Connecticut technical high school system, have posted significant gains.

In terms of federal goals, Kaynor often did better than traditional high schools in the communities it serves.

At Kaynor, 89 percent of sophomores passed the "proficient" mark in math last school year, improving 8.4 percentage points. Watertown, by comparison, had 81.1 percent of students reach proficiency. Waterbury only had 48.3 percent reach the mark.

Technical schools still lag behind most other districts in meeting state goal. It's a more rigorous measure than proficiency, but one without any official consequences.

On Monday, Department of Education staff were unable to produce more than two years of CAPT scores. But spokesman Thomas Murphy said the vocational schools have gained significantly in each of the past four years.

At Kaynor, the improvement has been profound. Just six years ago, only 44.7 percent of students scored proficient in math. Only 47.6 percent hit the mark in reading in 2002, as opposed to 89.6 percent this year.

Oliver Wolcott's scores are even higher, except in reading. Assistant Principal Kate Norton expects to use gains at her school to shake off old stigmas.

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Reading was the one sore spot for Oliver Wolcott. Proficiency held relatively steady at 88.3 percent, but the number of students meeting the tougher "state goal" slid 12.4 points down to 28.9 percent.

Murphy and staff at Oliver Wolcott and Kaynor credit success to several factors that came together about four to five years ago. The first was the hire of Abigail Hughes as head of the state's 17 vocational high schools. Local staff describe her as a champion of modernization.

There's a new system-wide curriculum, a new dress code and tougher entrance requirements. Both Oliver Wolcott and Kaynor turn away hundreds of students each year. There's also new language arts and math labs, which account for almost two hours of additional instruction on shop days.

At Kaynor, Principal Robert Axon credits the four-year-old "Capturing Kids Hearts" program. Freshman take "leadership classes," in which they learn to settle disputes and deal with adults. Teachers take classes on relating to students and being more supportive.

"Kids want to come to school everyday," Axon said. "That's an important component."