

School counselors suggest changes to CATEC Board
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The Charlottesville Albemarle Technical Education Center is in the midst of developing a strategic plan that aims to modernize programs and more closely align the school with Piedmont Virginia Community College.

However, at the same time the technical education center is trying to reinvent itself, the school is struggling to attract new students.

To get a better understanding of the curriculum decisions students are facing, the CATEC board recently heard from counselors from Albemarle County and Charlottesville public high schools.

“One of the things that we face is how kids come to value what we do at CATEC, and how we make sure that the message is getting out,” said Pam Moran, superintendent of the Albemarle school division.

“We want to know how we can support you as you communicate with our students about the programs that are offered here,” said Rosa Atkins, Charlottesville’s superintendent.

Attending CATEC requires students to leave their home schools for a portion of the day. Irvin Johnson, counseling director at Monticello High School, said that many times students simply aren’t willing to do

that.

"[At their home school] we have a lot to offer, like remediation, clubs and other things that they can participate in," Johnson said.

Lisa Morales, a counselor at Charlottesville High School, said community culture also plays a role.

"We've gotten so into saying that everyone needs to go to college when we need to be saying that everybody needs to consider further education and training after high school," Morales said. "But we've been saying the word college for so many years now that that is the only thing in their brains."

"Once they're in that mode [of thinking] it can be hard to shift a little bit," she said.

"What we have to help students realize is that career longevity can be obtained through certifications at CATEC," Atkins said.

Ginny Elgort, a counselor at Murray High School, agreed.

"It's not just our language, it's what they're seeing in media and the push that everyone is supposed to go to a four-year school," Elgort said, noting that career and technical education often carries a negative connotation.

"But there's a high percentage of kids who don't make it through their first year of college, and [CATEC] would be a great option," she said.

Albemarle School Board member Pam Moynihan, who is on the CATEC board, asked if the counselors emphasize that CATEC training can lead to a career.

Amy Wright, a counselor at Western Albemarle High School, said students learn about CATEC in their classes and when talking with counselors individually. When speaking with students one-on-one, Wright said she begins by asking them about their interests and their plans after high school.

"Because that's going to drive where our conversation goes," Wright said.

"I know you want to be impartial, but maybe it would be helpful if as counselors you could get the kids to understand that there's life after high school that doesn't necessarily include college, or includes college and career," Moynihan said.

"What we have to help students realize is that career longevity can be obtained through certifications at CATEC," Atkins said.

Monticello's Johnson said one way to combat the stigma sometimes attached to technical education would be to start talking about CATEC in middle school, and recommended hosting an open house with parents.

Meghan Parsons, counseling director at Albemarle High School, agreed, and said students need to be familiarized with CATEC before they'll agree to enroll.

"I'd like to see us doing more with our students to get them over here and actually see the programs, because we find that even with the classes in our own building, word of mouth from other students is how kids enroll," Parsons said.

What's more, she said, is students have a difficult time earning an advanced diploma while attending CATEC. For example, students can take math and English courses at CATEC, but not at the advanced and Advanced Placement levels many desire.

"That kind of takes a whole population of kids out," Parsons said.

In addition to the programming decisions, CATEC's 40-year-old facility is an obstacle to modernization. Last year, PVCC President Frank Friedman suggested that CATEC move to the community college campus.

Charlottesville School Board member Ned Michie, who also sits on CATEC's board, asked the counselors for their opinions on that idea.

Wright said it could be very enticing.

"From Western to [CATEC], my kids think that they're going to New Jersey," Wright said. "At PVCC they could take classes all day and dual enrollment the credits back to us."

Elgort said the concept could reap benefits beyond high school.

"Any time you can get their foot in the door to make them more comfortable at Piedmont, that also helps," Elgort said.

The CATEC board will continue to work on the strategic plan in the coming months, and the school is currently searching for a new employee to coordinate those efforts.

Moving forward, however, Wright pointed to community culture.

"We live in a community where the four-year college is the way to go, and it's a hard conversation to say, 'let's look at this other thing,'" she said.

Moynihan closed the discussion with some advice:

"The emphasis when you speak to kids I think should be on jobs and what they're going to do when they graduate, and the understanding that you don't necessarily have to go to a four-year college."