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COVID-19 FORCES VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS TO ADJUST

Training is disrupted as most programs are partly remote, and roughly one-third fully remote.

By Anne Michaud
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It's hard to learn to restrain a cat for an X-ray. It's even harder by video, said Morgan Sylvester, who is studying veterinary radiology remotely this year.

"In the past, we've been given stuffed animals to help show us how to position different animals, but it's hard to learn remotely," said Ms. Sylvester, 17 years old, a high-school senior at Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School in Fitchburg, Mass.

For teens studying for such fields as nursing and construction, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented distinct challenges to reaching their career goals. Remote instruction can't replace practice inserting a needle for phlebotomy students or superheating metal for aspiring welders.

Most vocational high school programs are partly remote and partly in-person this school year, and roughly one-third are fully remote, disrupting training. Educators predict a decrease in certifications for medical, nursing and dental assistants and technicians as well as for people aspiring to work in cosmetology, food safety, drafting and design, and construction. Training in these fields often provides entree into a well-paying job and an associate degree or another level of higher education.

In a January survey by the Association for Career and Technical Education, a national group of public-school teachers and guidance counselors, 74 percent of educators said they were much less or a little less effective than in the previous school year at providing hands-on learning and lab hours. Teachers surveyed said preparing students for industry certifications and performance assessments is difficult this year, with percent reporting that they are much less effective or a little less effective at helping students become certified.

"Programs in which the skills application is more actually hands-on or in which the computer technology needed is more specialized are struggling more," said Catherine Imperatore, research manager for the trade association.

Career and technical education – the modern form of vocational education that now also includes academic work – has made a resurgence with policy makers in recent years. The emphasis has moved away from manufacturing, transportation and construction and toward health care, communications and information technology.

Ms. Sylvester, who plans to study medicine in college, expects to graduate on time this spring with a high-school diploma and certification as a veterinary assistant. Because her school has been on a hybrid schedule, she is learning in-person two or three days a week and remotely the rest of the time.

Normally, the certification would qualify her to work in a veterinary clinic, but she has found that fewer are hiring during the pandemic.

"This year we've had a very difficult time finding places that will accept us to get further experience," she said. "So I feel like that definitely has been taken away."

Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School and the Rural Schools Innovation Zone collaborative in South Texas are programs that have been able to keep students on track for certification. The schools have juggled the schedules of students and teachers to provide sufficient training time in welding labs and construction. They are using smartphone apps for electrical-system design, sending mannequin heads home for cosmetology students and negotiating with trade unions to soften their apprenticeship rules.

"In a vocational setting there's a culture of a can-do attitude," said Sheila Harrity, superintendent-director at Montachusett, which is also known as Monty Tech.

Monty Tech draws from 18 communities in central Massachusetts and offers its 1,435 students a choice of 21 technical programs. Last spring the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators pooled resources to create a video library taught by expert instructors in various disciplines. Teachers and students can reach into this library for basic lessons so they can free up time for one-on-one work or practice hours.

To open for in-person learning, Monty Tech created one-way hallways and stairwells. It marked assigned seats with bar codes in the cafeteria and on buses to allow contact tracing if a student tests positive for Covid-19. The school sends out quarantine notices to families as needed, Ms. Harrity said, and it has shut down four times and gone fully remote when the number of infections climbed.

Still, Monty Tech is on course to graduate the same number of students this year as last, Ms. Harrity said.

To keep teachers on the job, the school reached out to a local Boys and Girls Club to provide child care for them. And to make sure students could get work experience, Ms. Harrity said she negotiated with plumbing and electrical unions to recognize apprenticeship hours conducted in unusual ways, such as a wiring exercise on an app.

"They have been willing to sit down," she said of the unions. "Otherwise they're not going to have that workforce pipeline that is expected and needed in their trades."

At the Rural Schools Innovation Zone in South Texas, one of the first adjustments school officials made was to more than double the number of welding booths to 31 for social distancing, said Michael Gonzalez, executive director.

The program is a partnership of three school districts – Brooks County and the communities of Freer and Premont – offering career and technical education and dual-enrollment opportunities for a variety of certifications with local colleges. The school districts joined to combat what Mr. Gonzalez called a deficiency in opportunities for rural, minority and economically disadvantaged students and an alarming dropout rate.

This school year campus administrative teams have customized more than 400 students' schedules to give them adequate hands-on lab hours and opportunities to attain certifications. In some cases, that means labs are open until 10 p.m. or on Saturdays, Mr. Gonzalez said.

Next fall many schools across the country will need to help students make up some work after missing in-person training, internships and co-op positions, Ms. Imperatore said. "They

will still be dealing with the kind of downstream effects of learning lapses – students who weren't able to fulfill their industry certification requirements or get the work-based learning hours," she said.