

REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON VOCATIONAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Senate Resolution 596, creating the Senate Study Committee on Vocational Student Organizations, was passed during the 1998 Session of the General Assembly. The Committee consisted of five members of the Senate, with Senator Harold Ragan serving as chairman. Committee members included Senator Richard Marable, Senator Van Streat, Senator Hugh Gillis, and Senator Rooney Bowen.

The purpose of the Senate Study Committee on Vocational Student Organizations was to study the conditions, needs, issues, and problems associated with vocational student organizations and to recommend any actions or legislation which the Committee deemed necessary or appropriate. This report describes the Committee's work and makes recommendations for consideration by the General Assembly.

The Senate Study Committee on Vocational Student Organizations held meetings in Atlanta, Douglas, Rome, and again in Atlanta. The first three meetings were public hearings designed to let committee members hear from those with first hand knowledge about the stability of these organizations, and the possible needs of these organizations.

The testimony, presentations, and written recommendations received from various individuals and organizations during the hearings certainly testifies to the importance of vocational student organizations and the depth of their support.

The meetings of the Committee took place during a period of major change for vocational student organizations (VSOs). These changes have been dictated by new financial constraints fostered by reductions in state staff and by the uncertainty of federal funding. Following several planning conferences, six of the organizations became non-profit organizations, with boards of directors and self-developed plans for staffing and budget. Each of the organizations has completed a strategic plan which was, in turn, reviewed by the Department of Education (DOE). These changes in structure provided an added impetus to the Committee's charge to evaluate the strength of these organizations.

VOCATIONAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN GEORGIA

Vocational student organizations are different from other student organizations because they are co-curricular. They are an important extension of the vocational education curriculum. They help the state of Georgia accomplish important public policy goals while meeting the personal development needs of its students. Vocational student organizations are important providers of the following benefits to all Georgians:

*** Economic Development and Workforce Preparation**

Labor Department statistics predict that by the year 2000, 80 percent of new jobs will not require the traditional four year college degree. Job seekers, however, will need some form of post secondary training. Vocational student organizations provide a way for students in middle and high school to start preparing themselves for technical training after high school or to enter the workforce directly.

*** Character Development for Young People.**

Vocational student organizations help teach students vital social and leadership skills, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and communication skills. They offer a proven program of leadership development, and instill important values in our young people. They also provide an incentive for many students to complete school. Vocational student organizations should be recognized and supported in this function in the same way that other efforts (such as the after-school program for middle school students) are supported.

One of the most impressive aspects of VSOs is their diversity. In Georgia, there are currently seven vocational student organizations: Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA); Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA); Future Farmers of America (FFA); Future Homemakers of America (FHA/HERO); Technology Student Association (TSA); Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA); and Vocational

Opportunities Clubs of America (VOCA). Table 1 below provides a brief description of Georgia's vocational student organizations.

Table 1: Georgia VSOs

<p>The Georgia Association of Distributive Education Clubs of America - 4,441 members Operates as an integral part of the marketing education programs in Georgia high schools.</p>
<p>The Georgia Association of Future Business Leaders of America - 11,762 members Organization for all middle and high school students participating in the business curriculum.</p>
<p>The Georgia Future Farmers of America - 11,828 members Organization is geared toward students studying agriculture.</p>
<p>The Georgia Future Homemakers of America/ Home Economics Related Occupation Association - 7,988 members The unique characteristic of this organization is its focus on the family.</p>
<p>The Georgia Technology Student Association - 3,500 members Organization for middle and high school students which promotes technology.</p>
<p>The Georgia Association of Vocational Industrial Clubs of America - 4,749 members Organization's focus is on students in technical education classrooms or work-based learning sites who want careers in trade, industrial, technical and health occupations.</p>
<p>The Georgia Association of Vocational Opportunities Clubs of America - 7,479 members The role of this organization is to provide at-risk students enrolled in vocational programs a platform to successfully strengthen their career skills through the Coordinated Vocational Academic Education (CVAE) and Project Success programs.</p>

(Membership figures are from the 1997-98 school year.)

As previously noted, the structure of the VSOs has changed dramatically. The Georgia Department of Education convened a "Futures Conference" in June of 1997 to conduct strategic planning for VSOs, as they now have independent statewide organizations. The intent was to encourage collaborative planning among VSOs, which would have their own state-level structure. In part, this was an effort by the Department to address a loss of staffing caused by previous budget cuts. The Department was seeking a way to carry out its responsibility for curriculum development and program evaluation, as well as supporting VSOs. Not surprisingly, these recent changes were a main focus of the Committee's questions during the hearings.

SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY AND COMMITTEE FINDINGS

Influence of VSOs

Present and past members of VSOs made a powerful impact on members of the Committee as they spoke from personal experience about the lasting influence these organizations can have on the lives of young people. For example, one student's involvement with FHA helped her remain connected to her school and her community even while she was in the homebound program due to a chronic illness. Her leadership abilities were developed by holding school and state level offices in FHA, and she was inspired to set career goals for herself.

Another speaker credited her experience with the Technology Student Association for her career success as a certified public accountant. She has continued to be involved as a volunteer with TSA. She testified that she firmly believes that students need ways to integrate skills learned in class with real world experience. This real world experience provides a foundation for them to further their careers when they enter the job market. She also noted that VSOs are not only for students who are not going to college. In fact, more and more vocational studies students are enrolling in college. Many similar experiences were shared with the Committee.

Needs of VSOs: State Funds

The federal Carl D. Perkins Applied Technology and Vocational Education Act, recently re-authorized, has been the main source of funds for VSOs. Testimony of a number of VSOs students, volunteers, and leaders suggests that there is a need for state funds, as VSOs need direct state funding that they can depend on to help them achieve their goals, particularly with federal funding being an uncertain source of support. However, the new law increased the number of mandated uses of funds from eight to 11. This means that permissive uses of Perkins funds, including spending for VSOs, may be pushed further down the list of funding priorities.

Although VSO advisors do not want their students to bear the cost of the activities conducted by their programs, they testified that activities are mostly funded by membership dues, conference fees and donations. In fact, 75 percent of the operating budgets of VSOs comes out of the students' pockets, 4 percent comes from corporate sponsorship and the remaining 21 percent is federal money from the Perkins grant that flows through the State Department of Education. Long term planning is difficult with the existing mix of funding; therefore, teachers have become more concerned with making sure they raise enough money for their organization. The Committee heard that it is difficult to ensure that costs are kept low enough to allow all students to take part in VSO activities. On one occasion, FBLA increased dues and a conference registration fee, but they saw a corresponding decrease in student participation.

Needs of VSOs: State Advisors

Another issue voiced by all of the vocational student organizations during the hearings was the need for more resources to coordinate programs at the state level in the form of state level advisors to the different VSOs. Due to staffing cuts and changes in the assignments of Georgia Department of Education staff, only FFA, which is organized

differently from the other VSOs, now has a full time Department of Education staff assigned to it. The Department of Education staff members do work with the other organizations, and their efforts are appreciated, but they also have other responsibilities. Because of this, some teachers and leaders feel that they lack needed support. It became very clear in the Committee meetings that while a number of teachers gladly volunteer their time to serve as directors or sponsors of the different organizations, they have increasingly felt that they are being asked to contribute more and more of their time and energy for less and less services provided at the state level for VSOs.

According to many concerned individuals who testified, the new structure does not give adequate resources for the state coordinators. For example, at the Rome meeting, Shelly Gray, Executive Director of FHA, testified that she had left a good paying and secure job to work for the organization. She has no money to run the organization, she stated, and in addition has no health insurance, no benefits, and no staff. None of the six organizations have approached filling the state coordinator position in the same way. While the fact that the organizations chose different ways to provide staff leadership is a tribute to their ingenuity, at least one industry representative testified that some members of the private sector see this staffing pattern as unreliable.

Many VSO leaders feel that the State Executive Director/State Advisor's position requires pay equal to that of a classroom teacher with state benefits including insurance, retirement benefits and a travel budget. The leadership, planning and direction of state programs, competitions and state events are crucial to the continued success of the current programs. Others felt that state officers should be given funds to pay their way to national leadership conventions where invaluable officer training is given. There was also sentiment expressed at the hearings that having staff from the Department of Education devoted to VSOs means having a closer relationship with DOE and the assurance that VSOs activities are in line with the curriculum.

Support for VSOs in Other States

In order to compare the present level of state support for Georgia VSOs with the support given to VSOs in other states, the Committee gathered examples of other states who have found different ways of strengthening their VSOs, including support for state level staff dedicated to each VSO.

* **NEW HAMPSHIRE** decided that relying on federal funds left VSOs in danger of inadequate support. Legislators in that state supported eight part-time advisors and some administrative support. There are eight VSOs (if HERO is counted separately) with membership of about 6,000 in New Hampshire.

***CALIFORNIA** has a unique fund source (horse racing) for vocational organizations which Georgia does not have; nevertheless, their funding formula is interesting. For the past school year, California organizations each received a base amount of \$40,000. Each organization then received an additional amount, which was calculated based on the number of members each organization had as a percentage of all VSO members. The

total amount of funds received in the past year to support 62,930 members was \$463,000. In addition, California VSOs have access to other grant funds through the California Association of Student Councils which receives \$50,000 a year, and the Divisions of Fairs and Expositions, which receives \$48,700.

* **MINNESOTA** has a new foundation which supports its VSOs. This foundation is similar to one that has been providing funding for gifted education in that state. While Minnesota supports VSOs via in-kind services such as office assistance and supplies, the School-To-Work Student Organization Foundation is intended to seek support from the private sector. There have been state appropriations of over \$455,000 to the Foundation over the past two years; however, the Foundation is carefully structured to provide a way of "blending" private and public funding. Minnesota's VSO Foundation has provided important support for the new state directors hired by the newly established boards in Minnesota, and could be a way for Georgia to provide personnel resources outside of the State Department of Education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee believes that strengthening the VSOs serving Georgia's youth requires state support. Adequate support for VSOs will help them achieve their goals and fulfill their mission of giving hands-on experience to students, the Committee recommends that the state allocate some state general funds to strengthen VSOs. State funding is needed to help support the implementation of VSOs in all vocational programs. State funding is needed to provide financial support for state administrative costs, including telephone costs, travel, postage, printing, office space, and clerical support. Most importantly, members of the Committee believe that state support is needed for state level advisors with fully-funded salaries and benefits. If state funds are found for VSOs, such funding should take into account the relative size of the organization, and be based on the organization meeting certain standards based on its strategic plans. To meet the present level of funding provided by federal funds, six VSO organizations (DECA, FBLA, FHA, TSA, VICA, and VOCA) would each need \$50,000, requiring an investment of state funds of \$300,000. The committee is not recommending any changes in FFA funding at this time. It is instructive to note that this is a small investment compared to the \$500,000 in the FY 99 budget for mentoring, and the more than \$10 million appropriated for after school programs.

CONCLUSION

According to the American Vocational Association, the elements of quality occupational education programs include: sustained professional development to enable educators to teach an increasingly diverse student population to meet world-class standards; state of the art technology in the classroom; integrated curriculum; comprehensive career development services; coordination with the vocational student organizations; and equal access to all students. Georgia's present enviable economic growth can only be sustained by continued excellence in all facets of vocational education. This includes vocational student organizations. In the words of the American Vocational Association, "...every

student must have access to high quality educational programs that meet employer standards and that take place in a variety of learning environments, including school, the workplace, and the community." The Committee firmly supports the Department of Education in any and all efforts to strengthen the state's VSOs.

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