

Response to the “Review of the ATC”

**Chester Bowles
February 5, 2008**

I am exceptionally happy to be here.

If that sounds odd, please know that I am happy to have a chance to offer a different perspective given the overwhelmingly negative report you heard about the ATC on January 8.

In offering my response, I will focus on three main topics:

- First, I will address the **accuracy and credibility** of the information presented in the report. I will point out numerous factual errors. And, sadly, how those factual errors formed the basis for conclusions that are wholly incorrect.
- Second, I will discuss the **consequences** that have resulted from the report. It seems clear that the way in which the report was conducted and presented have caused many to question its underlying purpose and goal.
- Finally, I plan to end my remarks by talking about the issue of **trust and respect**. It is, for me, the most personal and the most disappointing. But it has also had a significant impact on the morale at the ATC and throughout the district and the region.

I. HISTORY

Before I address the report itself, I feel it is important to start with some history.

I didn't count the number of times I have presented to the board over the past several years, but I suspect I have met with you at least 10 or 12 times. In each case, I have either been responding to specific questions you asked or I was presenting information that I thought would be of interest.

During the past two years:

- I shared enrollment statistics including a program-by-program analysis as well as other statistics such as the number of program completers, breakdowns by school, by gender, etc.
- I presented data from surveys of students and staff conducted to help determine interest in potential ATC programs
- And, from that survey data, I provided analyses of potential programs which included my assessment of start-up costs, on-going costs, and other considerations such as space needs and certification issues.

- I shared data from the state and other sources about employment trends and earnings potential.
- I shared information about students' use of Career Cruising, our career planning software. This included statistics about what careers are most popular based on student searches and interest surveys, and what ATC programs we already have that help prepare students for those careers.
- I shared information about the formal connections that exist between the ATC and post-secondary institutions—connections such as articulation agreements and dual-enrollment opportunities.
- And we have discussed the ongoing issue of ConVal's use of ATC space.

Clearly, the board was seeking information about ATC activities and was looking for me to provide advice about program changes and developments. But, for all the times we met and for all the information I presented, it was also clear that the board was never fully satisfied with the material I provided.

At one point, I recall that Bart Goodeve said something to the effect that "...I'm sure Chet can answer any question we have—he just needs to know what question is actually being asked." I couldn't agree more.

Looking back, I can recall only one decision that was reached as a result of those meetings and discussions. The decision we reached was to implement a concept I had been advocating for some time, the "Corner of a House" class that now serves as an introduction to the Building Trades program.

Recall that the decision to implement Corner of a House was made just last May with the expectation that it would start in September—a significant challenge. Implementation was made even more difficult by the fact that we needed to re-claim ATC space that had been used by ConVal for other purposes. A further complication was that no budget funds were allocated for the project. To be criticized now for the fact that some of the tools and materials didn't arrive until the second week of school seems, at best, to reflect a lack of understanding of the myriad issues to be addressed.

So, given this history, I was not surprised when I received this email message from Dick Bergeron on October 15:

As you are aware, I am charged with conducting a zero-based, comprehensive program review of every cost center located in our operating budget. This includes studies on staffing and program

effectiveness. To that end, I feel that I am not professionally qualified to conduct a program review of the ATC Center. I have engaged the assistance of an outside consultant with a long, rich history with effective technology based educational programs [to conduct the review of the ATC].

Although you always approach these situations with some trepidation, we looked on the upcoming review as an opportunity to have additional insight to how we could improve programming for the benefit of our students. We scheduled tours, meetings with teachers and students, and repeatedly offered access to any reports or information the consultant requested.

The review was conducted during October and November and the report was presented to the board on January 8. Since then, there have been newspaper reports, editorials, op-ed articles, letters to the editor, countless discussions, and, tonight, this opportunity to share my comments.

II. ACCURACY AND CREDIBILITY OF THE REPORT

Before I discuss the accuracy and credibility of the report, I would like to acknowledge some of the constructive suggestions and observations it contains.

Safety

The report contains a statement that reads, “Generally speaking, the building and facility is a fairly safe environment. Several issues were noted and need to be addressed.”

As a result of the review, many of those issues are already being addressed.

- Light fixtures are being raised in the space used for Corner of a House so they don’t interfere with students working on the roof of the structure.
- Storage racks for wood in the Cabinetmaking and Millwork shop are in place and there has been significant reduction in the clutter in that space.
- Carpet has been trimmed and, where it can be done, replacement is scheduled.
- Safety and “Right to Know” posters have been ordered for shop classrooms.

- We are in the process of gathering the Material Safety Data Sheets for the materials used in ATC classes.
- And we are exploring alternatives for installing spray booths even though the school's Art programs probably have more use for such a facility.

In addition to the identified safety issues, some of the other suggestions are also quite good. For example:

- The suggestion to include the 10-hour OSHA Safety Certificate as part of some of our programs is excellent. Indeed, a train-the-trainer session for New Hampshire teachers was already scheduled for this summer.
- There has been a school-wide safety committee in past years; the committee is being re-implemented as we speak.

Turning now to the report and some of the errors it contains, I am going to start with two of the more incendiary charges: the manner in which Special Education students are treated in the ATC and the collection and use of data about our programs.

First, Special Education students.

Recall that on January 8 you heard an extensive recitation of allegations and charges about the way in which Special Education students are systematically prevented from enrolling in ATC courses. "Barriers" was the term that was used. You also heard statements alleging that, once those students actually made their way into ATC classes, additional barriers are created in an effort to remove those students.

These are serious charges—violations of federal law, if they were true. But these charges and allegations are absolutely false.

I am perplexed as to how and where the consultant got this erroneous information and can't fathom why he failed to verify the data before making such false statements in a public presentation.

- First, the consultant never asked me or my staff for any data about our Special Education students.
- In spite of several offers, he declined all invitations to talk with Donna Noonan, the ATC secretary who maintains student enrollment data.
- He never spoke with Amy Clason-Gilmet, the Special Education coordinator at the high school.

- And, except for shaking hands, he never talked with Joe Hayes, ConVal's Director of Guidance.

Please bear with me as I share some numbers and statistics, but here are the facts.

Using data from December 21, the last day of school before the holidays, Special Education students comprise 15.8% of the total high school population. Remember that number, 15.8%.

If you include all classes taught by ATC instructors, 15.9% of the students enrolled in those classes are identified as requiring Special Education services.

In other words, the percentage of Special Education students enrolled in ATC classes is almost identical to the overall percentage of identified students in the school. That certainly doesn't sound like we systematically exclude Special Education students from enrolling in ATC classes.

So, what about the allegation that we erect barriers to exclude Special Education students if they do happen to be able to enroll in ATC classes?

Here are the facts. Last year, of the students who completed the four-course sequence to earn a certificate in one of the ATC programs, 14.8% were Special Education students. That's 14.8%, nearly identical to the percentage of Special Education students in the school.

And, looking ahead, we estimate that 22.1% of the students who earn ATC certificates this year will be Special Education students, a percentage that is significantly higher than the percentage of Special Education students in the school.

So, as a group, the percentage of Special Education students enrolled in ATC classes is almost exactly the same as the percentage of Special Education students in the school. Further, those Special Education students are just as likely to complete ATC programs as their peers who are not identified.

But, I can't leave the topic of how Special Education students are treated in the ATC without offering just one other example of an egregious error found in the report.

In discussing the Automotive program on page 13 of the report, you will find this statement:

There are no...Special Ed students in this program. While all involved were proud of its quality, it was reported that one of the reasons the program is so successful is because incoming students are thoroughly screened, to avoid any problems coming into the program. This program needs to be made available to all populations of students [emphasis original] and acceptable admissions criterion [sic] needs to be followed.

The report says no Special Education students are involved in the Automotive program. In fact, of the ConVal students currently enrolled, 40% are identified. Not zero, but 40%!

And, just in case you are wondering, more than 60% of the ConVal students enrolled in Building Trades are identified as Special Education students. 60%.

It seems clear that we don't prevent Special Education students from enrolling in ATC classes and we certainly don't erect barriers to prevent them from completing those programs. To the contrary, it seems that special education students are actually very well served by ATC programs.

How can errors like this possibly make their way into a public presentation? What does this say about the accuracy and credibility of the report?

Turning now to data collection

Recall this document that was included as a handout on January 8 [identified as Attachment #1]. I prepared the document in January 2005 to be used as the ATC section of the ConVal District Annual Report for that year.

The document shows results for a series of measurements called "Performance Indicators." The commentary in the document explains that these are data we are required to collect and report as a part of the federal Perkins grant.

Note that the consultant has circled the year 2003-04. And, at the bottom of the page, you will find his notes and question marks suggesting that the data is missing for all the subsequent school years.

Then, on page 4 of the report, you will find this statement:

Currently, the amount of up-to-date, accurate data that is available for review is almost non-existent. Most data provided was [sic] outdated. The support for the final reports was not available and the validity and accuracy of many areas is highly questionable.

The allegation is that, for some inexplicable reason, we stopped collecting and reporting data after the 2003-04 school year. Nothing could be further from the truth.

New Hampshire career and technical centers like the ATC collect a huge amount of data about student enrollment, attendance, etc. That information is collected in a software program called STAR (Student Tracking and Reporting System). The STAR data are then uploaded to the NH Department of Education which, in turn, summarizes the data for all the centers in the state.

Working with the STAR database is the primary job of Donna Noonan, the ATC Secretary. But, recall that in spite of several suggestions that he might want to do so, the consultant chose not to spend any time with Donna to learn about her activities or the data she maintains.

The consultant also refused all attempts to schedule time—even for a telephone call—to talk with the New Hampshire Department of Education. In the audience tonight is Virginia Irwin, the administrator of the Department of Education bureau that oversees career and technical centers in the state. I know that Virginia will tell you that, rather than being non-existent, data from our center is always current. I know she would also tell you that the data from our center is valid and accurate.

Did we really stop collecting the data in 2004 as it says in the report? Of course not. In fact, we were never asked about the data for those supposedly missing years.

We repeatedly asked if there was additional information or data we could provide for the consultant, but were always told that nothing more was

needed. With a simple request, we could easily have provided current information.

A contact with the Department of Education would have yielded this document [NH DOE report titled “PIReports2007”] This report shows data for the ATC for the years 2000 to 2007. But, also included in the report is a comparison of our data to the results from other centers in the state. In fact, I know that the newspaper contacted the Department of Education on January 9 and, in less than half a day, received an electronic copy of this report. The consultant could easily have made that same call to the Department of Education.

Let’s talk about bones.

I am certain you will remember the picture of the bones included in the presentation on January 8. You may also remember the comment about finding “skeletons in the closet”—an exceedingly crass attempt at humor.

The apparent reason for including the picture of the bones was to suggest that our programs are operating with very old, outdated materials and supplies. It also implies that we have dirty secrets we are trying hide. On the contrary, we are proud of the programs we offer, particularly given the limited resources available to New Hampshire schools.

Being a past member of the school board, I know that budgets are always a balancing act. Indeed, past budget requests have been denied for items such as additional books for the Anatomy and Physiology class and software for digital photography. And requests have also been denied—or delayed—for facilities-related items such as replacement carpet and even a request during recent renovations for a spray booth. But, for the most part, the ATC has had just as much budget support as any other department. And, just like every other group in the school, we have done our best to prioritize purchases in order to stay as current in our programs as we can.

But, those bones. Yes, we have a container in a closet with a collection of very old human bones. Those bones may actually pre-date the building of ConVal High School. But to imply that we are trying to teach a high-level science class with that limited resource is ludicrous. What the report doesn’t say is that, in recent years, we have purchased plastic bones, not human

bones. Why? Durability and cost. The report also fails to mention that the classroom has three complete human skeletons.

Competencies

Here is what the report says about competencies:

Although the current state of approved competencies seems to satisfy many members of the ConVal/NH education system, they (the competencies) are at best vague and written in very general broad statements....they are written in a way where they are meaningless and unusable as a tool to collect and compile meaningful data.

The report then offers this example of a poorly written competency statement supposedly being used in one of the ATC programs:

- The student uses power tools.

Actually, I searched through the competency documents we are currently using and could not find the example cited in the report. But I did find these statements:

- Demonstrate the safe use and care of woodworker's hand tools
- Demonstrate the safe use and care of woodworker's power tools

And, a little further along in that same competency document, you will find these statements:

- Construct a wooden product using basic joinery techniques
- Produce a turned product
- Construct a piece of furniture based on the frame and panel construction technique
- Construct a piece of furniture using the leg and rail technique.

To me, these sound like pretty specific, usable, and measurable competency statements.

The report also fails to mention that the competency documents we are using in New Hampshire were developed by a collaborative effort of the career and technical education teachers from across the state. The teachers from each subject area met a number of times with a facilitator who helped craft the competency statements for their particular specialty. The competencies were then reviewed by the career and technical directors—people like me.

Finally, the competencies were formally adopted and placed into use by the New Hampshire Department of Education.

The result is a uniform set of competencies that is being used and measured and reported the same way in every center in the state. This means that a student taking Building Trades at our center is being taught to the exact same competencies as a student in Keene, or Berlin, or Manchester. That, I think, is a very powerful concept. But it was never mentioned in the report.

Criticizing our competencies shows a lack of understanding of how New Hampshire's competencies were developed and how they are used. The criticism is also insulting to the many professionals from around the state who were involved in the development of those competencies.

Which leads me to the review process used to evaluate New Hampshire's career and technical education centers

You may not be aware that the Department of Education visits each career and technical education center in the state at least once per year to conduct what is called a "Monitoring Visit." Records are examined, programs are visited, and meetings with individual teachers are held. At the conclusion of each visit, the Department prepares a written record of the visit including a statement of findings.

These monitoring visits serve many useful purposes. The reviews allow Department of Education personnel to meet and know the local teachers and staff on a face-to-face basis. Equally important, the reviews offer an opportunity to verify that federal funds are being properly used and that forms and records are current.

Every single monitoring visit conducted by the Department of Education has found our center to be in compliance in all areas and we have been given satisfactory ratings in all areas, including Advisory Committees, use of competencies, and data collection.

The important thing to remember is that these visits are conducted by people who are familiar with the way in which our state has chosen to implement its career and technical education centers. Sadly, this information was not included in the consultant's report.

I could list many other examples of errors and omissions in the report, some large, some small. However, I am going to end this part of my remarks with a discussion of the portion of the report dealing with the Articles of Agreement.

Articles of Agreement

Recall this statement which appeared as the call-out quote in the newspaper article about the report:

It is clear that there are numerous violations of this agreement, which jeopardize the program and allow the N.H. Department of Education to terminate the program.

Let me remind you that the consultant chose not to speak with anyone at the Department of Education. As a result, no opinion was ever offered by the Department about whether it intends to "terminate the program."

In fact, the Department of Education has said that, while the three schools in the region might wish to review and revise some elements of the Articles of Agreement, there is certainly nothing that would cause the Department to terminate the program.

At this point, I'm going to read a portion of a letter to the editor written by Francine Fullam, Superintendent of SAU #63. The letter appeared in the Ledger-Transcript last Thursday [January 30, 2008].

We have always felt that Mascenic was a working partner with the ConVal School District because we were treated as such from day one, not merely as a sending school. We have enjoyed open communication and collaboration with Director Chet Bowles, as well as his assistance in securing grant funds to provide equipment for our Automotive Technology program, an ATC offering available to students from all three districts. We have been afforded the opportunity to set common school calendars (to the extent that three individual teacher contracts allows)..., and last year the Mascenic board chairman and I participated in a series of meetings with the board chairs and superintendents of Jaffrey-Rindge and ConVal to discuss needs and issues related to program

development at the ATC, with the goal of providing meaningful competencies for students' future careers. We are grateful for these opportunities, and proud of the work of the staff and students of Region 14.

Francine makes it clear that meetings were held, common planning of schedules was done, current programs were evaluated, new programs were discussed, and decisions were made. But, most of all, it sounds like collaboration took place between and among the schools in our region.

What are the violations the consultant feels we have committed? Given the comments made by Francine and the Department of Education, it would appear that there are none.

III. CONSEQUENCES OF THE REPORT

I said earlier that the way in which the report was conducted and presented have caused many to question the underlying purpose or goal of the report as well as its accuracy and credibility.

Recall these statements and recommendations made publicly by the consultant during the presentation on January 8:

1. Sever the relationship with Conant
2. The Department of Education could terminate the program [the ATC]
3. Develop your own ATC
4. Start your own Automotive program
5. Start your own Building Trades program

Also consider this: Several students have reported that a ConVal school board member openly discussed with them his plans to start both an Automotive and a Building Trades program at ConVal. Just last week, that same board member initiated a conversation about the report with a teacher. At one point, the school board member asked the teacher, "What's the big deal with the [ATC] report?"

So, now, with those statements in mind, try to imagine yourself as an administrator at Conant or Mascenic. How would you react to learning of these recommendations and plans? Even more disturbing, imagine how you would feel if you learned of these plans only after they were made in a

public meeting, but without any prior discussion or advance notice of what was going to be said. How would you react to the prospect that your students might not be able to access programs at the ATC? Wouldn't you think the report is a "big deal?"

Craig Mueller is the principal of Mascenic High School. As you know, his school hosts both the Automotive and Building Trades programs offered through our region. But understand that, on its own, Mascenic does not have enough students to justify running either program. What if the region is broken apart? What if ConVal starts its own Automotive and Building Trades programs as is being openly discussed by a school board member?

Mr. Mueller clearly thinks the report is a "big deal." His response has been to plan for the worst. In fact, he has already contacted other nearby schools—Wilton-Lyndeboro and Milford—to see if they would be interested in sending students to his programs. That's a perfectly logical and appropriate action. Understandably, those schools would be more than happy to be able to send their students to Mascenic's award-winning programs and use the seats ConVal would be giving up by starting its own classes.

Now try to place yourself at the Department of Education. The Department used more than \$4 million of scarce state funds to build and furnish the ATC facility. I suspect the Department would want to have some serious discussions with you about how to recover the cost of the bricks and mortar that is no longer being used for its intended purpose. That is a "big deal."

During the past week I received both a telephone call and an email message from Fred Bramante. Fred, as you probably know, is a member of the State Board of Education. He is the former Chair of that board and has also been a driving force behind the concept of "real world learning."

Fred and I have had quite a bit of contact over the years. Most recently, we served together on the High School Reform Task Force. Coincidentally, I represented both ConVal and the state association of career and technical directors on that committee. But Fred knows our region well, too. He has visited some of our programs and, last spring, nominated the Mascenic Automotive program for an EDie Award, the NH Award for Excellence in Education. In fact, he says the Automotive program may be the best in the country.

Fred clearly thinks the report is a “big deal.” Quoting from his email:
Hi Chet:

I got a call from Craig Mueller that alarmed me, so, I thought I'd drop you a note. Craig told me that a consultant from Massachusetts made recommendations to the ConVal district that would have negative implications on the career and technical education programs and the overall cooperative relationship [in the region]. This concerns me for a number of reasons.

The first concern that comes to mind is the extent to which an out of state consultant understands the recent changes in New Hampshire's Minimum Standards for Public School Approval and the New Hampshire High School Redesign document. The reason I question this is because, in the past, I've seen efforts to cut career and tech programs in order to alleviate other school concerns (i.e. money, overcrowding). To me, this represents some of the old thinking that we are trying to get away from.

The career and technical education model of close interaction with community resources in order to bring more personalized, hands on, real world opportunities to students, beyond the traditional classroom environment, is the direction we are going in and many of the lessons that influenced these current Department of Education documents came directly from career and technical education concepts.

It's programs like Mascenic's...and the lessons that they can help teach the rest of the system, that will help us reach this honorable goal. While I can understand the pressures that schools are under to keep their budgets in line, cutting career and technical education programs does not seem like the prudent thing to do.

Finally, I have also been called by several members of the legislature, people who are concerned that a region-wide resource—the ATC—is in jeopardy.

So, is the report a “big deal?” Based on the comments and concerns discussed above, the answer is a clear yes. When you add the concerns expressed by any number of students, parents, and community members and you begin to see how much public concern has been generated by the report. Unintended consequences, perhaps, but consequences nonetheless.

I believe our collaboration with our two neighboring districts is a relationship that is mutually beneficial. It serves students from fourteen different towns and provides an economy of scale for all involved. It is a model that should be complimented and emulated, not condemned.

IV. TRUST AND RESPECT

In his article in the Viewpoints section of the newspaper, Bob Condon asked a series of questions. Many of you know Bob. He is a former senior vice president at Franklin Pierce College and, for the past several years, has served as a senior fellow with the New Hampshire Community College System. Bob's questions are excellent—I think it is important for those questions to be answered.

The first question: “Did Mr. Bergeron consult with Chet, before Mr. Ryan’s arrival, regarding the purpose of the audit and how the findings would be constructively used?”

The only information I had about the review came via the email from Dick and similar information from Sue Dell who was relaying information that had been shared with her during a meeting with Dick.

The second question: “How many of the other career and technical centers in New Hampshire has Mr. Ryan audited, and when?”

The answer is none. In fact, I offered to take the consultant with me to one of the monthly meetings of the state association of career and technical directors, but he declined. Also recall that he declined all efforts to arrange time to talk with representatives from the Department of Education.

And the final question: “Did Mr. Ryan conduct both an entrance and exit interview with Chet?” Parenthetically, Bob points out that this is an accepted principle of good and fair program review techniques used by both the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and the U.S. Department of Education.

The answer is no. My first meeting with the consultant consisted of an interview and a series of questions. The only explanation of his role was the cursory statement that he had been hired by Dick to conduct a review. There was no exit review with me nor was I given a summary of findings prior to the presentation on January 8.

Which brings me to the actual presentation of the report.

I wonder how many of you know that I did not even see a summary of the report until about an hour before it was presented publicly at the meeting on January 8. Then, all I received was the exact same information as the other members of the audience: a copy of the PowerPoint slides.

Dick did meet with Sue Dell and me the day before the report was presented. But, although we discussed some of the general findings, I received nothing in writing. Neither Sue nor I had any indication that the report would be so overwhelmingly negative and we certainly had no opportunity to review the report to correct some of the many factual errors it contains.

The morning following the presentation I received an email with a copy of the narrative that was read the night before. But, to this day, I have not even seen a copy of the binder with the complete report.

Do you understand what this means? Imagine how it feels to be blindsided and to be so personally and professionally humiliated in a public meeting—with incorrect information, I might add. I was not even given the courtesy of having advance notice of what was going to be said, let alone the opportunity to correct the obvious errors.

Did you know about this lack of communication? Or are you just learning about it tonight? Regardless, you must realize that it goes beyond being non-professional and insensitive, it is morally and ethically wrong.

Those of us who live and work in the ATC are very proud of what we do. And we would welcome the opportunity to work constructively to revise and enhance our program offerings. But, there is probably not a single staff member in this district who isn't saying, "If this can happen here, who's next?" It seems that our partner schools, the community, the Department of Education, the State Board, and even members of the legislature are asking that same question.

It's the issue of trust and respect. It takes years to develop, but just moments to lose.

Let me end with several questions for the board:

- Is the information presented in the report complete and is it factually correct?
- What was the underlying purpose of the report? Was it really done to offer guidance and suggestions for how programming at the ATC could be improved? Or, was there a different, pre-determined goal and objective?
- What are the consequences that now result from the way in which the report was conducted and presented?
- And, perhaps most important, how does the report and its presentation affect the climate of trust and respect within the district, and beyond?

As Bob Condon said in his article, "...the community is relying on the leadership of the School Board to set the tone for how educators in the District are to be treated."

You have the report. You have heard from the community. You have heard from our partner schools and from various state agencies. And, now, you have heard my comments.

Thank you very much for allowing me this opportunity to speak with you tonight.