

Creating a New Generation of Mariners

Primary and secondary maritime education in America.

by CAPTAIN ARTHUR H. SULZER (U.S. NAVY, RET.)
Maritime Academy Charter High School

Most people are familiar with the image of the cabin boy serving tea to the passengers on the *Titanic* or the “powder monkey” passing shot to the gunners in movies like “Master and Commander.” These are accurate portrayals of how marine education had been conducted for hundreds of years. It was very much a hands-on experience learned aboard ships.

This system changed as ships evolved from sail to steam and became more sophisticated. The U.S. Naval Academy and the first civilian maritime school in New York City opened in the late 1800s. Others followed over the years. In 1946, the War Shipping Administration transferred the Liberty ship SS *John Brown* to the New York City Board of Education. The *John Brown* served as a vocational high school until 1982.

In 1966, the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association (MEBA) opened a mariner school in the Southern Hotel in Baltimore, Md. In 1967, the Seaman’s International Union (SIU) created the Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training in Piney Point, Md. Attached to the center is the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship that trains entry-level seamen. (See related article.)

In addition to the maritime academies and Lundberg School, all of the maritime unions, MEBA, SIU, American Maritime Officers, Sailors’ Union of the Pacific, and Masters Mates & Pilots operate state-of-the-art training facilities supported by their contracted shipping com-



panies. These schools provide continuing education and upgrading courses for the union’s members.

Declining Mariner Numbers

Several combining factors have accelerated the present-day need to create a new generation to follow the sea as a profession. These factors include an aging workforce, declining compensation as compared to shoreside jobs, and the additional administrative efforts required to maintain mariner credentials.

Traditionally, America’s seafarers came from countries or families with a seafaring tradition. At the entry level, mariners were often first-generation immigrants. This supply of individuals has decreased due to the immigration policies of the 1990s and heightened security concerns and requirements for mariners to have citizenship.

The American public has largely forgotten that we are a nation dependent on waterborne commerce for our daily needs. Most people are unaware of how far their cameras, bottles of wine, or pairs of pants had to travel to arrive on their store shelves.

Maritime Education Is Needed at the Primary and Secondary School Level

With fewer immigrants and children of mariners, we need to create a new generation of mariners from a new source of individuals through education and awareness. That group may be the underserved urban students

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Overview of Maritime Elementary and High Schools

New York Harbor School (Grades 9-12) Brooklyn, N.Y.

Started in 2003, the school is a part of the N.Y. Department of Education. It was initially funded by New Visions for Public Schools, a non-profit that attracts foundation money to start small, theme-based schools. There are currently 96 "new vision" schools in New York City. The school is one of four theme schools housed in an existing city high school in an economically depressed area of Brooklyn. The school demographics are 50 percent African American and 50 percent Hispanic. The school has a relationship with South Street Seaport Museum, located on the Manhattan waterfront, and uses its facility and sail training vessel. It has also developed a partnership/mentoring program with SUNY Maritime College in the Bronx. The college provides maritime course material, visiting instructors, and various academic and leadership opportunities to the school. Additional information on the school can be found at www.nyharborschool.org.

Palm Beach Maritime Academy (Grades K-8) West Palm Beach, Fla.

Started in 1999, this is a primary school with 400 students. It is a tuition-free charter school operated by the Palm Beach Maritime Museum under a performance contract with the local school district. The school's focus is on maritime studies, science, and technology. Character education and life skills are also an integral part of the curriculum. The former USCG facility on Peanut Island is used for training, along with various historical facilities operated by the museum. The school has a uniform policy and a unique requirement that parents invest a minimum of 20 volunteer hours with the school. In 2006 the school earned an "A" for achieving annual yearly progress under "No Child Left Behind" legislation. Additional information on the school can be found at www.pbmm.org.

Maritime Academy Charter High School (Grades 5-12) Philadelphia, Pa.

This school opened in 2003 with 125 students, grades 5-7, in temporary facilities. In 2006 it moved to a permanent location at the Army's former Frankfort Arsenal site. The school presently has more than 700 students, with the first class graduating in 2008. Its demographic mix is 70% African American and the balance a mix of Latino, Caucasian, and Asian students. The school operates as a traditional middle and high school and is developing a model apprentice program with K-Sea Shipping (a national tug and barge operator) and a partnering/mentor program with SUNY Maritime College. Long-term plans include a program of maritime studies offering vocational, apprentice, and academic tracks. Additional information on the school can be found at www.maritimecharter.org.

Bayfront Center for Maritime Studies (Grades K-12) Erie, Pa.

This is a non-profit, community-based organization that opened in 1998. Its mission is to design and deliver hands-

on maritime educational, vocational, and recreational opportunities to members of the community. The center has provided these experiences to more than 10,000 students from the surrounding township school districts. The center works with school districts or individual teachers to provide a maritime learning experience that fits into whatever curriculum they are using. Programs include environmental studies, maritime history, boat building, sailing, and navigation. The center operates a 41-foot sail training vessel. Additional information on the center can be found at www.bayfrontcenter.org.

Maritime Industries Academy (Grades 9-12) Baltimore, Md.

This private school opened in 2003 in inner-city Baltimore. The school is funded by the Baltimore Public School District under a special program and is under central administration control. It operates a Navy Jr. ROTC unit and has had a Navy career focus option. In 2007 it developed an industry partnering curriculum with local maritime companies, such as Vane Brothers, Moran Towing, the Maryland Port Authority, and others. The school has been working with faculty at the Maritime Institute of Technology and Graduate Studies and the Master Mates and Pilots union training school to utilize school facilities for their students. Additional information can be obtained by calling 443-324-0790.

Mar Vista High School (Grades 9-12) Imperial Beach, Calif.

This high school, in partnership with the Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC), started a program in 2002. The program is funded under California's Regional Occupation Program, which provides funds to schools for vocational training and funds from the Navy. Since opening, over 250 students have completed training, and many have gone into the maritime industry. The program is designed to have students secure entry-level USCG documents as wiper for the engine room or ordinary seaman for the deck department. The students in 11th and 12th grade follow a regular high school course of study. They use their elective courses to take the U.S. Coast Guard-mandated training provided by an outside contractor, Training Resources, Ltd, that carries the necessary course approvals. The partnership with Military Sealift Command, under its Cadet Shipping Program, is designed to provide prospective MSC employees the required sea service and is the same program used by the maritime academies. The school sends groups of 10 students with a school instructor to a MSC ship in the summer of their senior year for several weeks. Students who complete the program become eligible for hire by the Military Sealift Command upon graduation, and several are currently working for MSC. Additional information on the school can be found at www.suhsd.k12.ca.us/mvh or by contacting the MSFSC Cadet Shipping coordinator at (757) 417-4223.

from our cities. A maritime education can provide a gateway to a career that offers steady employment, excellent pay, further education, and a solid future.

In 2003, I had the opportunity as a founding board member to start the Maritime Academy Charter High School in Philadelphia. The school opened with 125 students and has expanded to more than 700 students. At present there are approximately 16 marine or maritime-themed elementary, middle, and high schools open or opening in the United States. The average size of each school is about 350 students. These schools are located around the country in major U.S. ports on the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts, as well as on the Great Lakes.

It is important to note that there is a difference between “marine” and “maritime” schools. Marine schools have programs that deal with oceanography, biology, and marine sciences. These schools have generally been in operation since the 1990s. The maritime schools deal with the subjects, training, and skills required to work as a crewmember on a documented vessel. In addition, there are several that offer training to work in the maritime industry ashore, such as at a marina, shipyard, or port facility.

Outcome of Maritime Education

Early research has shown a number of positive trends in primary and secondary maritime education programs around the country. When presented with information about maritime education and its benefits, students and their parents show strong interest in the programs, and all the schools have full enrollment and a long waiting list.

While there is not yet a large amount of data, since the programs are all fairly new, it appears that students who enroll in the maritime programs are sticking with them. In addition, the quasi-military nature of the maritime industry, with its requirements of command, responsibility, accountability, scheduling, uniforms, and required training is being transferred to the students. This has had a positive effect on the manner in which they behave among their peers and others.

There are strict attendance and academic standards—merely showing up in class will not earn a passing grade. Once students realize this, they attend classes, study the material, and earn passing or high grades. For many, this is a new experience. The wonderful result of this is that by learning how to study and bring up their grades in other academic classes, they gain overall confidence and pride in their accomplishments.

So far, from the data available it appears that employment will be strong. Many schools report offers of summer internship programs and offers of employment for their graduates.

On the Horizon

In April of 2008 the Ship Operations Cooperative Program (SOCP), MARAD, and USCG sponsored a two-day conference titled “Maritime and Intermodal Education for Primary and Secondary Schools in America, Onboard to a Future Career.”

As a follow-on, SOCP and MARAD have held meetings around the country to develop curriculum and educational materials for the schools. Congressman Elijah Cummings has formed the Maritime Education for Primary and Secondary Education Coalition. The congressman was a keynote speaker at the conference in April and has a maritime high school in his district. This coalition will work to foster and develop maritime K-12 programs and education in America.

Many years ago our nation built a network of lighthouses in our seaports to guide mariners from sea to a safe haven. I hope that a network of “education lighthouses” can be established to shine the light for urban students to find their way to a maritime career.

About the author:

Captain Arthur H. Sulzer, a graduate of SUNY Maritime College, is an actively sailing mariner who holds a USCG master's unlimited license and third assistant engineer's license (steam motor and gas turbine). He also completed 30 years of active and reserve duty with the U.S. Navy. He holds an M.S. in transportation from SUNY Maritime College, an MBA in finance from Hofstra University, and is completing his Ed.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to his involvement in maritime education, he is a professional marine surveyor and consultant in the Port of Philadelphia.

