

Re-Prioritize Basic Skills and Technical Training for High School Graduates

By Wayne D. Lewis Jr.

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Key Points

- In too many places, students who *earn* high school diplomas lack the minimum knowledge or skills to succeed in college or the workforce.
- Conservatives in every state should champion commonsense measures to make the high school diploma more meaningful.
- These basic reforms include ensuring American high school graduates can read and perform basic skills in mathematics, providing curriculum and program options in secondary schools that align with students' aptitudes and interests and regional workforce demand, and investing in and prioritizing rigorous, industry-aligned career and technical education programs.

A public education system's effectiveness should be based primarily on whether graduates have been equipped to be productive workers following program completion. Otherwise, neither the system nor the completion certificate (diploma) is worth the tax dollars spent. As Kentucky's education commissioner, I found it woefully apparent that despite schools' and policymakers' best intentions, too many students who *earned* high school diplomas in Kentucky's public schools lacked the minimum knowledge or skills to succeed in college or the workforce. College leaders across the state routinely said high school graduates' preparedness for credit-bearing coursework was inadequate.

The evidence of their concerns was the less than half of Kentucky public high school graduates who met the state's relatively low benchmarks for college readiness in reading and mathematics. But the

even bigger problem for the state was the tens of thousands of high-wage, high-demand jobs that went unfilled, month after month, because not enough Kentuckians had the skills and credentials required to fill those jobs—despite the state's high school graduation rate of over 90 percent annually.

According to state longitudinal data, less than two-thirds of Kentucky's public high school graduates immediately matriculate into postsecondary education or training of some sort,¹ and the majority of those students drop out of college or training before earning any credential—such as a certificate, diploma, two-year degree, or four-year degree.² These graduates were more likely to have met or exceeded the state's watered-down readiness benchmarks. The state's labor force and economic data show that simply having a high school diploma without basic skills or preparation for the workforce

is not enough to keep graduates out of poverty. In Kentucky and nationwide, graduates without a postsecondary credential of some kind are much less likely to be gainfully employed and much more likely to live near or below the poverty line.

The stakes for students exiting high schools today without skills have become exponentially higher.

These educational shortcomings are neither new nor isolated to Kentucky. In the early 1980s, Michael Bernick reported on recent high school graduates in San Francisco who struggled to independently complete applications for job-training programs and their inability to demonstrate reading and mathematics skills at the ninth-grade level.³ As far back as the 1960s, one-fifth of high school graduates nationally applying to the armed services were denied entrance because they could not pass basic academic skills qualifying tests.⁴ But the stakes for students exiting high schools today without skills have become exponentially higher.

Many jobs that once existed for low-skill workers no longer exist. Technology, automation, artificial intelligence, and societal change are accelerating the elimination of low-skill jobs. In April 2019, Walmart announced it would be adding thousands of robots to its stores across the US, taking on tasks including scrubbing floors, scanning shelves, and even sorting boxes as they arrive at stores. Amazon now has more than 200,000 robots at work in its warehouses. Both McDonald's and Wendy's have invested heavily in kiosks in their restaurants' lobbies, replacing the once solely human task of taking customer orders.

These shifts are happening in the retail sector, advanced manufacturing, and health care. Robots are not only cleaning floors and taking inventory but also conducting some of the most delicate human surgeries ever attempted. Meanwhile, American high schools continue to graduate students without basic skills in reading and math or a certification or skill that makes them valuable in the 21st-century economy.

While there is no simple solution to the long-standing American education problems of social promotion, watered-down curriculum and expectations, and secondary school experiences that are misaligned with the realities of postsecondary education and the workforce, some commonsense measures should be championed by conservatives and implemented in every state to make the high school diploma more meaningful.

Requiring Demonstration of Basic Skills

Social promotion, particularly in American high schools, has ruined the lives of untold numbers of young people. Graduating students who are functionally illiterate and innumerate are set up for failure. While some states and school districts celebrate their soaring high school graduation rates, thousands of students annually receive high school diplomas without having basic skills. In every state, minimum high school graduation requirements should in some way assure that students receiving diplomas have basic skills in reading and mathematics, and schools and adults should be held accountable for ensuring it.

Diversifying Secondary School Curriculum and Program Offerings

High school curriculum and programs should be just as diverse as students' interests and aptitudes. All students should be required to achieve basic competence in reading, mathematics, and citizenship, but schools should also provide increased options and flexibility for students to pursue academic and technical programs aligned with their educational and career aspirations. For some students, a college-preparatory curriculum—including higher-level courses in mathematics and lab sciences, Advanced Placement (AP), and introductory postsecondary academic coursework—is most appropriate. For other students, appropriate secondary programs include pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship experiences and preparation for certifications in automotive technology, manufacturing, or the skilled trades. States' school accountability systems and graduation requirements should equally weigh academic and technical pathways. School districts should develop and make these program options available to students,

and policymakers should ensure that archaic funding and attendance-zone policies do not prevent students from accessing programs that align with their interests and aspirations.

Prioritizing Career and Technical Education

Career and technical education (CTE) programs continue to be regarded and funded like an afterthought in too many states and school districts, when, in reality, CTE programs should be central to public education. Given that high school should prepare graduates for postsecondary education, training, and the workforce, CTE programs that provide students with in-demand technical skills and industry-recognized certifications should be as highly prized as AP coursework is. In fact, regarding funding priority, CTE programs should be prioritized over AP coursework—not because these programs are more important, but because they have been underused and defunded for the past two decades. CTE programs in health care, advanced manufacturing, and information technology touch and benefit a much larger number of students than college prep coursework does, and workforce demand in technical areas requires that we prepare many more students for middle-skill technical jobs.

About the Author

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.

Notes

1. Kentucky Center for Statistics, “High School Feedback Report on College Going and Success,” November 2020, https://kystats.ky.gov/Reports/ShowReports?ReportId=HSFR_2018&publishDate=20201109.
2. Kentucky Center for Statistics, “High School Feedback Report on College Going and Success.”
3. Michael Bernick, “Illiteracy and Inner-City Unemployment,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 67, no. 5 (1986): 364–67.
4. James Olsen, “Instructional Materials for Functionally Illiterate Adults,” *Phi Delta Kapan* 46, no. 9 (1965): 450–52.

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Aligning Secondary Curriculum and Expectations with Postsecondary Realities

Far too often, secondary curriculum and expectations for secondary students are misaligned with postsecondary realities and expectations. This misalignment includes college freshman entering first-year writing courses with no familiarity with Modern Language Association or American Psychological Association style guidelines and secondary CTE programs that culminate with school-designed and -recognized certifications that have no meaning or value in the workforce. If high school diplomas or high school itself are ever to become meaningful again, secondary programs and expectations must truly prepare students for what comes next in their academic and professional lives.

Too many educators, leaders, and policymakers have prioritized maximizing points in school accountability systems and inflating high school graduation rates with little regard for how those decisions affect students’ lives. We must end the pervasive school accountability gamesmanship that puts too many high school graduates on the fast track to poverty, dependency, or prison.