

*Published: Saturday, August 27, 2011*

## **Success isn't a one-track deal**

### **Focusing on four-year degrees above all else limits students' chances at a prosperous future**

*By William C. Symonds and Cindy Zehnder*

Despite decades of education reform, too many young people are coming out of our education system without clear career plans, or the education and skills necessary to succeed in today's economy.

This is not news to anyone who has followed youth and education issues, or who has teens or young adult children struggling to find their way. What is new is the growing body of thought regarding how we might address this huge challenge.

When the Harvard Graduate School of Education released its widely acclaimed Pathways to Prosperity report in February, many were surprised that it did not join in the chorus of education reform reports that argue the solution is forcing students to take more math and science classes, and to encourage all students to pursue the goal of graduating from a four-year college.

Instead, the Harvard report forcefully demonstrates why schools need to promote multiple pathways to success, with increased work-based learning for students, greater engagement of employers in our schools, and more internships, apprenticeships and career guidance to help students visualize what their future can be.

There's nothing new about these proposals. The state's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, composed of business, labor and government leaders, has been promoting these ideas for a number of years.

What is different about the Harvard report, aside from its Ivy League pedigree, is that it has taken "head on" the argument that everyone should pursue a four-year academic degree. Instead, education should foster multiple student pathways to prosperity. In other words, the Harvard report argues for broadening our definition of "college" when we say "college for all."

There is no question that every student should plan on education beyond high school. Most of the good-paying, family-wage jobs require some college or post-high-school training and certification -- and studies have shown that a "13th year" can make the difference between earning a living wage and barely scraping by. Higher education levels also help insulate people from joblessness, with unemployment rates far lower among those whose education extends beyond high school.

However, by focusing so much of our attention on a four-year degree, we have walled off other pathways that lead to success -- from career and technical education courses that offer relevant, hands-on learning inside the classroom to community colleges, apprenticeships and internships at job sites. Internships and apprenticeships are especially beneficial because they allow students to take an appealing line of work for a "test drive." When a student has a career in mind (even if they don't ultimately pursue it), math, reading and writing have a purpose. The result is greater motivation and a passion for learning that will be a passport to a better future.

With guidance and support, students who have received high-quality career training can become part of the backbone that supports our economy in Washington -- doing everything from caring for us when we are sick (80 percent of health-care jobs do not require a four-year or greater degree), building our homes, ensuring our infrastructure is sound, protecting our community and providing a whole range of important products and services. To those who suggest that if we expand career-oriented education we would be "tracking" students into "less-than" occupations, our answer is two-fold.

First, decades of educational reform have not improved our high school graduation rate or college completion rate. Instead, we have a growing number of young adults who leave school without a plan for their future and end up stuck in dead-end jobs. One in four Washington high school students fail to graduate with their class and 13 percent of our state's 18- to 25-year-olds are neither working nor attending school -- a recipe for long-term unemployment and intermittent low-wage work. Many of these young people are being "tracked" into lives of frustration and failure.

Second, despite the poor image some may harbor of career and technical education, many students who choose career education are well-prepared to get well-paying jobs.

We need to act now to prevent this extended economic crisis from creating another lost generation of workers who have the will to work, but lack the education and skills called for by employers.

This spring, Gov. Chris Gregoire allocated \$3 million in federal Workforce Investment Act funding toward aerospace worker training. The urgency is growing to fill these jobs -- with Boeing hiring as many as 100 workers a week during a March hiring boom -- as the labor force ages and few young workers have the skills needed to take their place. And Washington is not alone. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are 226,000 vacant positions in American manufacturing and 524,000 openings in trades, transportation and utilities. These jobs pay well, but we aren't preparing students with the technical skills needed to fill them. Instead, too many people continue to view these high-skill, high-wage jobs as "vocational consolation prizes."

How can we broaden the focus of our education system so that more of our young people are prepared to succeed? Academic rigor is important but so is keeping the spark for learning alive. This means providing students with opportunities to use their hands and minds in ways that go beyond a multiple-choice test to solving real-life problems. It means integrating academic learning with work experience, which repeatedly has shown to be a superior way to learn.

Washington has many great examples. Take Granite Falls High School's shop class, where an all-girl team competed internationally with a car they built. Or South Kitsap High School, where students in one career-and-technical education class earn industry-recognized credentials with projects and work experiences at the nearby naval shipyard, and can work toward an engineering degree. Sno-Isle Tech Skills Center in Everett delivers work-related high school courses -- many of them counting also for college credit.

By teaching youth about science, technology, engineering and math in a real-world context, students are able to continue their education beyond high school, whether in an apprenticeship, community college or four-year university.

We know what works. We now need the will to effect more systemic change. This includes more support for quality career and technical education programs with the science and math rigor necessary for college entry. It means more engagement of industry through career days, job shadowing, mentoring, internships and teacher training. It means more emphasis on career planning through guidance programs in our middle and high schools.

We can do this. But it calls for reshaping our notion of what constitutes a "good education" into a broader, more inclusive "educational menu." Our young people deserve multiple pathways to viable, living-wage jobs instead of a one-size-fits-all approach that too often doesn't fit.

William C. Symonds is lead author of the Pathways to Prosperity report and director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Pathways to Prosperity project. Cindy Zehnder chairs the state's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board and is a former chief of staff to Gov. Chris Gregoire.

© 2011 The Daily Herald Co., Everett, WA