

Toward a New Vision for American High Schools

By Gary Hoachlander

“Pathways to Prosperity,” released Feb. 2 by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, argues that our high schools are overemphasizing a single pathway to four-year college. [The report](#)  calls for a broader vision with diverse high school experiences for young people.

The report quickly drew criticism from some who fear that this call will legitimize the pernicious tracking that has pervaded education in America. The polarization around this report, which raised some tough questions, underscores just how difficult it is to have constructive conversations about new directions for American high schools.

Yet we must recognize that there are many different ways for high school students to pursue and achieve excellence. Imposing a uniform academic experience on everybody, simply to avoid the specter of tracking, is not in the best interest of all students. What engages and motivates some students will not excite and move others. Until we accept this simple fact, we will not make much progress on our nation’s shameful dropout rate and substandard achievement.

Let’s be clear: This is not about accepting low standards for some and high standards for others. Rather, it is about recognizing that in our full and complex world, excellence and success take many forms—a single pathway is very much at odds with promoting widespread accomplishment for all students. Uniformity simplifies policymaking; it does not nurture deeper learning.

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Ironically, diversification is perhaps best demonstrated in the very colleges and universities that college-for-all advocates seek to make more accessible. Students there can routinely choose among pathways in architecture, business, computer science, engineering, education, nursing, agriculture, the arts, physics, mathematics, law, or many other pursuits. While these programs of study have commonalities, what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in each is decidedly different. Compare, for example, the admissions requirements and course offerings for Juilliard with those of MIT. Both institutions epitomize excellence, but their expectations of students are not the same. And their students have different interests, aspirations, talents, and formal educational preparation.

As a nation, our challenge for high schools is to create strategies that offer students a variety of pathways to college and career success without lowered expectations, especially for the disadvantaged and students of color. This is hard to do, and there is no single right way. But there is a lot of evidence that we can do it.

Here are four principles to help guide the design and implementation of different pathways for high school students:

- A pathway, by design, should prepare students for both college and career. The days are gone when someone could succeed with just a high school diploma. Everyone will need further education and career preparation.
- A pathway should prepare students for the full range of postsecondary options. “College” no longer just means a four-year postsecondary opportunity. It also includes community college, apprenticeship, and formal employment training.
- A pathway should connect challenging academics to the real world, helping students to better understand what they need to know and why they need to know it. Students deserve thoughtful and truthful answers when they ask, “Why do I need to know this?”
- A pathway must produce significant growth in student achievement—in academics to be sure, but also in communications, critical thinking, problem-solving, technological literacy, and other cross-disciplinary areas needed for success in the modern world.

In California, we’ve adopted these principles to help expand a new approach to high school improvement called [Linked Learning: Pathways to College and Career Success](#). Linked Learning brings together strong academics, demanding technical education, and real-world experience to engage students academically and prepare them for lasting success in their postsecondary education and careers. High school students can choose to pursue engineering, arts and media, law and justice, or biomedicine and health, to name just a few options. Delivery of Linked Learning takes many forms, including theme-based high schools, theme-based small learning communities, and career academies.

Every Linked Learning pathway consists of four essential components:

- A challenging academic core (English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language) required for admission to the four-year California State University system that also has real-world applications;
- A cluster of four or more technical courses that deliver concrete technical knowledge and skills;
- Work-based learning with enhanced instruction through mentoring, job shadowing, internships, and school-based business; and
- Counseling and supplemental academic instruction and support services to provide context and project-based learning opportunities.

Equity advocates in California worry that Linked Learning pathways will reintroduce tracking. They are right to be cautious and vigilant. Any education strategy, including traditional college prep, can be done well or badly. That is why attention to high-quality design and implementation is a critical component of the Linked Learning approach. All participants in the [Linked Learning District Initiative](#) engage in Linked Learning pathway certification, a process that uses detailed criteria and an assessment rubric to ensure that each pathway promotes equity, quality instruction, student engagement, and student achievement.

Linked Learning is not the only way to redesign the high school experience, of course. But it does illustrate that diversification and choice are not at odds with equity.

It's time to move beyond the simplistic college-for-all-vs.-tracking debate and get about the very difficult business of designing and delivering high schools that engage and motivate young people. We can prepare all students for both college and career, but they will need a range of experiences to get there. In this respect, advocating more "pathways to prosperity" is on the right track.

Gary Hoachlander is the president of [ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career](#).

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