Robert Schwartz, Professor Emeritus, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Does a strict focus on academic education come at the expense of adequate career/technical preparation?

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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Present

John Adams, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Lars Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director). (Also present were approximately 30 other invited education and public-policy leaders.)

Summary

According to Harvard Professor Emeritus Robert Schwartz, the rise of the standards system in U.S. K-12 education has led to increased pressure on schools to devote more time to core academics at the expense of vocational education. By their mid-20s, only 32 percent of young Americans have graduated from a four-year postsecondary institution. Yet, those four-year colleges and universities are the ones influencing standards for high school graduation.

Schwartz says strong vocational education systems in certain other countries, especially those with the strongest youth apprenticeship programs, help kids make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. He believes the U.S. system keeps kids in adolescence longer than they need to be. He points to Switzerland's system as a good example of a system that supports the learning and development of young people and helps them through the transitional years. He notes that the Swiss and German apprenticeship systems are mainstream systems, preparing students for white-collar careers in high tech or banking, as well as for traditional blue-collar trades.

He believes Americans have always seen vocational education as a second-class system for kids who can't do academic work. As a result, vocational education in comprehensive high schools has withered away and we've behaved as if college were the destination for all. Schwartz says all kids

could benefit from much earlier exposure to all kinds of career options and the kinds of training and education that can get them to those careers. He endorses graduating students from high school with both certified, structured work experience and experience taking courses on college campuses.

Biography

Robert B. Schwartz is professor emeritus of Practice in Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education (HGSE). He joined the faculty there in 1996. He also co-leads the Pathways to Prosperity Network, which is a collaboration among a group of states, HGSE and Jobs for the Future designed to ensure that many more young people graduate from high school, attain an initial postsecondary degree or credential with value in the labor market and get launched on a career, while leaving open the possibility of further education.

From 1997 to 2002, he also served as president of Achieve, Inc., an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help states improve their schools. From 1990 to 1996, he was the director of the education grant-making program of the Pew Charitable Trusts. He began his career as a high school English teacher and principal. He has also served as an education advisor to the mayor of Boston and the governor of Massachusetts; an assistant director of the National Institute of Education; special assistant to the president of the University of Massachusetts; and executive director of The Boston Compact, a public-private partnership designed to improve access to higher education and employment for urban high school graduates.

Schwartz has written and spoken widely on topics such as standards-based reform, public-private partnerships and the transition from high school to adulthood. He holds a B.A. in English from Harvard University, an M.A. in English from Brandeis University and a Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S.) from the Administrative Career Program at the HGSE.

Background

This meeting, featuring Harvard University Professor Emeritus Robert Schwartz, was convened by Ted Kolderie, senior associate of Education|Evolving, senior fellow of the Center for Policy Design, and Civic Caucus interview group member. Although the Civic Caucus did not organize the meeting, several interview group members were included because of the organization's continuing focus on human capital issues in Minnesota. The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: one in September 2014 laying out the human capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and a follow-up paper in January 2015 offering recommendations for maintaining a high quality workforce in Minnesota.

Discussion

In 2011, the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) published the report *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21 st Century* .

The report, authored by Robert Schwartz, economist Ronald Ferguson and journalist William Symonds, was intended to follow up on a 1988 report, *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America,* issued by a commission established by the William T. Grant Foundation . According to

Schwartz, looking at high school and higher education dropout data, the *Pathways* report concluded that the case for investing in developing a set of rigorous career and technical education pathways, alongside the strictly academic pathway, is even stronger today than it was in 1988.

The idea in recent years that all kids need a solid foundation of core academic skills to be able to take a successful next step somehow morphed into the idea that, therefore, all students needed to go on to a four-year college. The rise of the standards movement in K-12 education has led to rising academic expectations and rising accountability standards, Schwartz said. This has increased pressure on schools to devote more time to core academics at the expense of career-related programs that might engage kids and motivate them to stay in school. "While the rhetoric in today's policy environment is that all students should leave high school college- and career-ready, the reality is that almost everywhere, career readiness is on the back burner," he said.

Schwartz noted that research for the *Pathways* paper showed that over 70 percent of high school graduates go on to enroll in a higher education institution. But by their mid-20s, only 32 percent of young Americans have graduated from a four-year institution, another 10 percent have a two-year degree and about 10 percent have acquired a recognized one-year occupational certificate from a postsecondary education or training institution. "That gets us to 52 percent," Schwartz said. "What's our strategy for the other half of the kids?"

And, in looking at how the "successful ones," that is, those with four-year degrees, are doing in the labor market, Schwartz said 44 percent of them under age 25 are underemployed, while another seven or eight percent are unemployed.

Schwartz referenced the 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* , which posits that too many students are drifting into four-year institutions with no idea of why they're there. The book presents a study of 2,300 students at 24 universities that shows that, measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment, 35 percent of the students showed no significant improvement in critical thinking skills, analytic reasoning, persuasive writing and other skills after four years in college.

All kids could benefit from much earlier exposure to the kinds of career options that are out there and the kinds of training and education that can get them to those careers. Schwartz reiterated that students often show up on college campuses with no idea of why they're there. He said they choose majors with no information about the job opportunities associated with the majors. They don't think they need any job experience, because they believe someone will hire them once they have a college degree.

In the U.S., university systems serving only one-third of the kids are deciding on standards for high schools. Countries with strong vocational systems divide high school into upper secondary and lower secondary, Schwartz said. Compulsory education ends at the end of ninth grade. "That has a powerful effect," he said. "Kids who are barely hanging on only have to hang on through ninth grade, not through 12 th grade. It avoids this disease that in the upper years you have universities deciding on standards for what all kids need to learn."

In these other countries, students are asked what they want to be in the world and then the system designs an education program to give them the continuing academics they need and also a really customized path to the particular occupational sector they've chosen to work in.

On the last Programme for International Assessment (PISA) exam, which measures how well 15-year-old students can apply what they've learned to real problems, Swiss kids had the highest math scores anywhere in Europe, including Finland.

Strong vocational education systems in certain other countries, especially those with the strongest youth apprenticeship programs, help kids make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Schwartz has studied these systems in Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and Singapore. The programs, he said, offer lots of support from adults and help kids who are 16-to-19 years-old move into more adult settings, taking more responsibility in a highly structured way. "The systems support the learning and development of young people and help them through the transitional years," Schwartz said.

"The Swiss have done a better job than anybody else I know in designing a system that works both for young people and their economy," Schwartz said. "It's a very expensive country and they can only survive by competing on skills, not cost. Why is the Swiss economy so strong, despite the fact that only 25 percent of kids have classical academic university degrees?" Schwartz said the Swiss argue that one key factor is the deliberate intentionality in the way their vocational system is structured.

According to Schwartz, the Swiss and German apprenticeship systems are mainstream systems, serving a broad range of students, preparing people for white-collar careers in high tech or banking, as well as for the traditional blue-collar trades.

The way we do things keeps kids in adolescence longer than they need to be. By age 15 or 16, Schwartz said, many kids want to get on with their lives and be doing something meaningful. The question, he said, is how to get kids connected with adults doing things they're really passionate about. One way to get kids into adult settings is through the workplace and another is to get kids onto college campuses while they are still in high school.

Graduating our kids from high school with both work experience and college experience would be a good strategy. According to Schwartz, the best way to assure that a student is ready for college is to have him or her successfully complete college-level courses on college campuses while still in high school. College is not just an academic phenomenon; it's a cultural phenomenon, as well. Some states, he said, might make this a graduation requirement.

The best way to measure career readiness would be for kids to have a structured, certified work experience while in high school, he said. We could certify the softer skills: working in teams, solving problems collaboratively, learning to take initiative when appropriate and to work under close supervision when appropriate, and solving problems in multiple steps.

Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change, reported that high school graduation rates in Minnesota increase dramatically for low-income kids and kids of color who complete at least three career-tech college courses while in high school.

We've always seen vocational education as a second-class system for kids who can't do academic work. Schwartz pointed out that while we've always had strong vocational programs in

some parts of the country, "we have a not-so-happy legacy from the vocational system. Too often, vocational programs, especially in our urban districts, became dumping grounds for kids of color, tracking them into low-skill dead-end kinds of jobs."

Vocational education in comprehensive high schools withered away and we behaved as if college were the destination. "One consequence of focusing so heavily on college as the destination" he said, "is that we lose a lot of kids along the way." He said there are two main reasons kids drop out of high school: (1) it's really boring and (2) they see no relationship between what they're being asked to study in school and any future they can imagine for themselves.

We need to change cultural attitudes to reflect the realities of work and educational opportunities. Schwartz referenced the January 2015 statement by the Civic Caucus, "A Statewide Crusade to Secure Minnesota's High Quality Workforce," which calls for a change in cultural attitudes about what are better and lesser careers and educational options, strengthened career counseling, support for early career-oriented goal-setting, encouragement for teachers to take internships in their fields, exposing students early to the soft skills needed in work, nurturing the expansion and public awareness of apprenticeships, linking education paths and career opportunities, and ensuring that students and teachers understand the operation of the workplace.

We in the U.S. need to deal with many cultural issues regarding types of education and types of work. Schwartz said some of the issues are related to parents and their assumptions about what their children will do. And there's a devaluing of skilled work and the actual making of things, he said. But in cultures that have a strong apprenticeship tradition, the skilled worker is a respected cultural figure.

In these countries, Schwartz said, the vocational apprenticeship system is the mainstream system. Switzerland has maintained a system where 70 percent of the kids move into the vocational system. Germany's system has been losing market share, however, and is now down around 50 percent. Denmark's system has been declining, as well. Policymakers in these two countries are worried about the decline and about falling into the American system.

The Swiss have loaded up the vocational system with incentives. Schwartz said students there have two choices: sit in classrooms only and learn strictly academic subjects or, at age 15 or 16, move into a system of applied learning. "You can be in an adult setting; you can be getting paid while you're learning, starting at $800 a month in Switzerland; you can be in a situation where you're getting a ton of support; you're getting a credential that has value all across the country; and you have opportunities for continuing education."

"You're not dead-ended," he said. "You can cross back over to the academic side. You can also switch from the academic side to the applied side, but you need to get a year of work experience first." He pointed out that Switzerland doesn't do the same early rigorous tracking that the Germans do.

In the countries with good vocational systems, classroom learning becomes much more aligned with learning at the workplace. In the U.S., apprenticeship happens after high school and

serves mostly people in their 20s, Schwartz said, and is really part of the workforce system. In the other countries, however, the apprenticeship system is under the umbrella of the education system and it's focused on the learning of young people.

In response to a question about the background of the students in the good apprenticeship programs overseas, Schwartz said, "None of these countries would allow 23 percent of their kids to grow up in poverty. So they're not dealing with some of the challenges we're dealing with."

In countries like Switzerland, the employers take a much more active role. In the U.S., educators are designing programs they think will meet employers' needs, Schwartz said. In the other countries, business sector groups define the standards they think kids need to meet to effectively move into their sector. He said the businesses collaborate on curriculum and assessment development. The business groups recruit companies to provide paid internships or apprenticeships. "It's a very different model," he said. "The educational program is shaped around the learning taking place in the workplace."

To prepare for a broad range of occupations in countries like Switzerland, Schwartz said, the preferred route is for students to go into an apprenticeship program for three or four years. It might not take three or four years to learn some occupations, he said, but "they're learning lots of things other than just the technical skills they'll need."

Following the *Pathways to Prosperity* report, Schwartz joined forces with a Boston-based nonprofit, Jobs for the Future, to develop a national network, working with 25 to 30 regions in 10 states on how to adapt the lessons from the strong vocational systems overseas. In the U. S., the community colleges and the technical colleges need to be at center of this work, Schwartz said. "Start with community colleges," he advises people in the network. "They already have established relationships with employers. Get agreement on pathway programs at the community colleges that are aligned with high-growth, high-demand fields and then map backwards to the high schools."

Schwartz said the strategy is to start kids on college while they're still in high school through programs like Minnesota's Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program. Connect them with these technical programs, he said, and then employers might be willing to provide paid summer internships between students' junior and senior years in high school.

Jay Haugen, superintendent of Minnesota's Farmington School District: We can reimagine education and we should be expecting way more from the system and from the kids than we are. Haugen said the Farmington schools are teaching kids by third grade to customize their own learning. "Teach them the skills of self-direction," he said. "Let them start creating their own learning pathways through technology. Staff members can help students raise their aspirations, help them discover things and help them assess themselves." He said the students can explain what standards they're meeting through their projects.

"Our final belief is that we are powerful as a people more because of our uniqueness than our sameness," Haugen said. "Find that uniqueness in each kid, make sure they don't have hurdles in their life, help them learn the things they need to know and let them fly on things they're excited about."

The Cristo Rey model is an adaptation of getting kids to link their education to their work. In Cristo Rey Jesuit high schools around the country, including the one in south Minneapolis, students work one whole school day each week at real jobs in companies and a few nonprofits. Their pay goes to help pay their tuition at the school.

The communication about these issues must come from state-level leadership. Schwartz said state leaders must help parents understand their state's economy and what skills young people need to have to keep that economy growing. He called for designing a system where young people and their families get much more information much earlier in a systematic way. "Think of this as restoring a better balance between the academic purposes of education and the career and civic purposes of education," he said. The career and civic purposes have gotten submerged in the overzealous response to the academic standards side.

To create internship and apprenticeship programs at scale, you need a well-staffed workforce intermediary organization that sits between the employers and the high schools and colleges. Schwartz said the organization must prepare both kids and the workplace settings for internships and apprenticeships. He also believes the organization can take the internship logistics off the back of small- and medium-sized businesses, which will encourage them to participate in the programs.

As an example, he mentioned the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) , a nonprofit organization that connects business, the Boston Public Schools, higher education, government, labor, and community organizations. The PIC's website describes the organization as "the connection between education and workforce, between school and career, and between classroom and the workplace."

"This can't be done on the fly," Schwartz said. "Schools can't do this by themselves."