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Let's retool schools to train students for work that's real and rewarding

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TUESDAY, MARCH 1, 2005
UPDATED AT 2:04 PM EST

'Obsolete.'

He is the richest single person on the continent, one of history's most notable overachievers, and Bill Gates says that high schools of today serve no useful purpose.

The multibillionaire co-founder of Microsoft was speaking this past weekend at a National Governors Association special meeting on high-school education. The chairman of that influential group, Virginia Governor Mark Warner, has called for national reform of U.S. secondary schools and Gates, a university dropout, tagged secondary schools as education's greatest failure.

"Training the work force of tomorrow with today's high schools," he said, "is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe."

It is intriguing that today, as Canadians are widely debating the state of postsecondary education -- Ontario, for example, has launched a massive campaign concerning university funding -- the United States has dropped down a level to worry more about the kids who might not even get to university.

Gates says schools are doing a pitiful job preparing students for college and technical jobs.

In Philadelphia a few weeks back, the chairman of a special School Reform Commission noted that, "It is easier for one of our student graduates to go to Harvard or Yale than to enter the building trades, and I don't think that's fair."

What brought James Nevels, who runs his own billion-dollar business, to this realization was that his city is on the verge of the largest education spending spree in a half-century, \$1.5-billion in new buildings and renovations, and the area trade unions are saying there won't be enough skilled workers available to do the jobs.

What the world really needs, Nevels concluded, is not more MBAs and performing arts graduates. but more bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, painters, drywallers, plumbers, framers, cement finishers. "Why," he asks, "should it be easier to go to college than to get into the trades?"

Perhaps the real problem is not so much "obsolete" high schools, as Bill Gates suggests, but "obsolete" parents -- parents whose expectations are out of whack with reality.

Today's parents grew up in an era that, for most, was comfortable enough to afford dreams. Those who failed to follow theirs, or only partly followed them, were so determined that their own children should reach for the improbable that they encouraged whatever fancies struck.

In many ways, this is admirable. If dreams aren't for chasing, they aren't for anything.

Where things got derailed is in the numbers. The world, even a world of considerable wealth and leisure time, has only so much room for filmmakers and scriptwriters and musicians and dancers and actors and novelists and inventors and adventurers and whatever other fancy struck around the end of high school, especially if those dream chasers expect to make a steady living from their highly encouraged hopes.

Those who can't make the living they dreamed of are now making do with jobs they never, ever dreamed of doing, and are often living in the last place anyone ever thought they'd end up at this age: home.

It is extraordinary how many of today's parents, who work in dull jobs, dead-end jobs, bad jobs, today dream of being something like a carpenter, something where work can be seen to be done, accomplishment can be admired, where real work has real purpose and, just to add a small footnote, real reward.

It is well and fine to worry about university funding -- no one would ever suggest that higher education is not of very high value -- but there should be a little more worrying done about education that might not lead to a degree but will indeed lead to a life.

It is estimated that, with coming retirements in skilled trades, Canada will be short one million good workers by 2020. That includes everything from fixing your car to building your house. If people think finding an electrician is impossible today, just wait for tomorrow.

There are, mercifully, a number of Canadian educators who are worrying about precisely this reality. They want high schools more plugged in to the real needs of the labour market. They want credits available for such training. They want kids, no matter what their marks, to feel free to dream about the remarkable satisfaction that can come from a good trade, the decent living and the pleasure that most of us do not get in seeing a project from notion to completion.

And yet, probably for no other reason than the snobbery of their parents, surveys say that more than four of every 10 Canadians wouldn't even consider a trade.

These enlightened educators have their work cut out for them.

Perhaps they could simply abridge one of the sillier dreams we parents encouraged -- that everyone could be a television star -- and show how the specialty channels have somehow made tool belts sexy.

And not only that but, unlike expensive higher education, you get paid to learn when you study a trade.

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