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Schools Should Reduce Need for Remedial Classes

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In recent weeks, both presidential candidates have traveled to Ohio and stressed the importance of improving our nation’s schools. But here’s a question that neither candidate has addressed: When are we going to stop deceiving our kids about their high-school diplomas?

Teachers and parents do their best to teach kids that honesty is important. But this effort is undercut when millions of American kids are misled every year about one of the biggest accomplishments in their young lives.

The lie is that, while we tell our kids a high-school diploma means they are prepared for college, the truth is that many of them are not. A recent study by Strong American Schools, an education-advocacy organization, found that more than one-third of American students require remedial education in college, and the problem is more costly than previously thought. Ohio students are no exception. In 2006, a full 36 percent of recent high-school graduates enrolling in Ohio’s public colleges and universities had to take remedial English or math or both. Sadly, many of these students will not earn enough college credits to get a degree.

Of the millions of students entering college this fall across the country, more than 1.3 million will require at some point in their college careers remedial classes to learn skills they should have learned in high school. What should truly alarm us is that the vast majority of these kids performed well in high school, or at least that’s what they were told.

According to a national survey of college freshmen, nearly four out of five college students requiring remedial classes had a high-school grade-point average of 3.0 or better. These kids were led to believe they were ahead of the curve in high school, only to find out they were far behind the curve when they arrived at college. As you might imagine, this carries some heavy consequences.

When a student must be taught in college what he was supposed to be taught in high school, we are paying for the same education twice. Only now we are paying collegiate prices for a high-school education. This is a cost borne by students, teachers and taxpayers.

As a nation, we’re paying more than $2 billion annually to reteach our kids at public colleges. Here in Ohio alone, we spent more than $100 million in 2006 on university-level remedial courses. So how do we fix this problem,

First, we must get colleges to do a better job collecting and disseminating data about remedial students. This will help identify the schools and school districts that are struggling to prepare their students, so that corrective measures can be taken.

Next, we must raise expectations in our high schools and not be timid about challenging students. Nearly 60 percent of remedial college students report that their high-school classes were easy. We do these kids no favor by putting them through the motions of a high-school academic career. There should be rigorous standards that kids must meet to graduate.

Finally, there needs to be greater coordination between school and college. There is a tendency to lump primary and secondary education in one box and college in another. Instead, we need to think of education as a kindergarten-through-college process. Colleges need to communicate to school systems about the academic standards they expect their students to meet, and school districts need to ensure their kids can meet those standards.

If the presidential candidates truly believe education is important, they should tell us how they will work with governors to give real meaning to a high-school diploma. Our kids should graduate from high school confident they are ready to succeed in college and secure a good job in our knowledge-based economy.

— Bob Taft

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