

# **Calls to Toughen High Schools**

# **Remain Misguided**

**Point of View Essay** 

by

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## March 17, 2005

### **Gregory Smith**

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The text below has been revised by the author. The original, published version ("Making our high schools tougher remains misguided," March 17, 2005, *The Oregonian*) is available at: http://www.oregonlive.com/commentary/oregonian/index.ssf?/base/editorial/1111057227153320.xml

In a democracy, schools should help children with diverse abilities and interests to become self-supporting adults. The recent governor's conference on education, however, reaffirmed the nation's preoccupation with a definition of school achievement focused on a narrow set of academic skills and knowledge. According to this vision, America's educational system should graduate 100% of its students from high school and, theoretically, 100% from college. This vision takes into account neither human variability nor the needs of our communities. It furthermore serves to obscure the true source of economic disparity in this country: our collective unwillingness to reward all work with a living wage.

Drawing upon U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, former New York Times education reporter Richard Rothstein has written tellingly about job growth in the United States being primarily located in occupations that do not require a college education. Even if a greater proportion of U.S. students were to earn baccalaureate degrees, there would not be enough high-skilled and high-paying positions for them to fill. Why then are governors and business leaders so determined to make high school "tougher"?

Sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb provide a possible answer in their book, *The Hidden Injuries of Class.* They describe the way low-paid workers in the United States ascribe their socio-economic position to their failure to take advantage of this country's apparent opportunities. Because school performance is often associated with economic outcomes, less successful students tend to blame themselves rather than social inequities for their inability to earn better incomes.

As this self-blaming has become a part of more and more peoples' lives, it is not surprising that labor unions have weakened and the salaries of corporate owners and managers increased. If schools reward only the academically inclined, education initiatives based solely upon a restricted definition of excellence and accountability will exacerbate this process. They will increase competition for a diminishing number of well-paying jobs while at the same time expanding the number of people who have been labeled and then often see themselves as inadequate.

Oregon's original Educational Act for the 21st Century was not like this. In addition to putting into place a system for assessing achievement, it aimed to address the needs of the 50% of students who choose not to or are unable to attend college. These students represent many of the people who make life possible in industrial society. They are the people who care for the young and elderly, the people who construct houses and repair cars, the people who serve us in restaurants and supermarkets, the people who build and maintain the infrastructure of our towns and cities. By joining required coursework to central community functions, the Educational Act of the 21st Century combined accountability with educational programs designed to help young people discover the confluence of their own talents and social needs. It sought to encourage all students to become productive citizens confident of their abilities and their capacity to contribute to their communities.

Calls to link high school graduation to the completion of an expanded but narrowly conceived college prep curriculum honor the talents of only a proportion of our fellow citizens. Coupled with a failure to mandate a living wage for all work, such calls may inadvertently consign the remainder to lives of potential poverty and regret.