

Texas Must Avoid a Return to the Vocational Track

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And is different from *or*. College *and* career readiness is not the same as college *or* career readiness. The first sets an educational goal of high academic standards for all students; the second provides high academic standards for some, while leaving others with limited options.

For years, Texas' policy has been that no matter the ZIP code, schools were expected to prepare every child for college. President Obama has also repeatedly stated such educational goals, and President Bush worried about "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Yet these stated commitments to universally strong standards will soon come face to face with the reality of Texas' new system of tiered diplomas. Because of House Bill 5, some ninth-grade students will be enrolled in a track leading to a "distinguished" diploma, while others will prepare for a "foundation" diploma. The stratified status of these diplomas is well-described by their names.

The trend exemplified by HB 5 should be troubling to Texans who believe in the public school as a place where equal opportunity thrives. Although vocational classes can be engaging and worthwhile, sorting 13- and 14-year-olds into separate pathways that determine their future is an idea that should give us pause.

Our country's history provides clear lessons. At the start of the 20th century, schools faced an influx of immigrants, and policymakers responded by creating programs for those who were called the "great army of incapables." Vocational tracks prepared immigrants to be factory workers, while the children of well-off parents were given a college preparatory education.

This pattern of separating students into different classes was repeated during the era of racial desegregation as a way to maintain segregated classrooms, and it was repeated in the 1970s when students with special needs were increasingly enrolled in mainstream schools.

Americans have long valued the potential of schools to provide a route from poverty to prosperity. But such routes are closed if disadvantaged children are directed toward lower-tier tracks and diplomas. History shows that lower tracks are disproportionately occupied by students in poverty and students of color. When lawmakers adopt these misguided policies, they open up opportunity gaps that inevitably lead to the achievement gaps that these same lawmakers then decry.

The new, tiered diploma system in Texas has been defended as flexible, and its backers have also dismissed concerns that the new system will create low-track dumping grounds for students with fewer advantages outside school. We are very doubtful –decades of research shows those concerns should be taken very seriously.

But Texas will have to develop and heed its own evidence. House Bill 5 requires the Texas Education Agency to hire an external evaluator to estimate the Act's effect on high school graduation rates, college readiness, admissions, completion, working credentials, employment rates and earnings. We hope the evaluator will also be tasked with estimating the Act's effect on the resulting racial and socio-economic stratification between the tracks.

And if the evidence shows that Texas' new tiered diploma system results in lesser academic opportunities within school for those children with the most limited opportunities to learn outside of school, we hope the Legislature will revisit its decision to sort and select 13-year-olds into restrictive pathways. At the very least, every school leader should work to ensure that all of the young people of Texas are on the right track to becoming "distinguished."

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