

## **Time to shift our focus from “No Child Left Behind” to “Every Child Self-Sufficient”**

ALEXANDRIA, Va., September 19 -- Parents: In 10 years, will your teenagers be thriving in a career that matches their passions and abilities, or will they still have to rely on you for support while they struggle to define what they want to do with their lives?

Educators: In 10 years, will your efforts to keep students from dropping out (of either high school or college) be applauded, or will your educational programs be thrust back into another cycle of redesign?

Legislators: In 10 years, will the students of today have the skills to compete in globalized markets, or will far too many be consigned to a life of just getting by due to a lack of education or training?

What kind of foundation are we laying for the legacy of education and, ultimately, this country? The naïve, short-sighted strategy of mandating ever-higher academic requirements has not proven effective in reducing dropout rates. On the contrary, it has pushed far too many students out of school, relegating them to a subsistence lifestyle.

If trends persist, 75% of today’s entering high school students will not complete the post-secondary education required to thrive in our globalized world. Whether or not students leave high school with a diploma and then follow through with plans for post-secondary education or training often hinges on the attitudes they develop in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade about themselves, their futures, and their educations.

Can they envision a future in which they are economically self-sufficient? Are they able to articulate a plan that will get them to that point? Do they understand the consequences to their life if they don’t get the education and training necessary?

What would happen if teenagers started becoming career-focused and career-committed at 13 or 14 instead of at 25? What would happen if they were led through a specialized course as 8<sup>th</sup>- or 9<sup>th</sup>-graders, a course culminating in the development of a comprehensive, yet flexible, 10-year career and life plan? What if that personalized plan was designed to lead them through high school, post-secondary education/training, and into the workforce with an understanding of what it takes to thrive in their communities and families?

Would our young adults be more focused and better prepared to contribute to our economy? Would they cease to become financial burdens to their parents, what are known in England as KIPPERS: *Kids in Parents Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings*?

If we are to expect attitudinal changes from our students, we need to first adjust our own perceptions about what our students are capable of believing about themselves, their futures, and the vital role that education must play. If we strive only to prevent them from being “left behind” and rely mostly on test scores and exit exams to measure their progress toward adulthood, we limit the possibilities of where they could be headed; namely, toward leading fruitful and impassioned lives as self-reliant members of society.

The time has come to shift our focus from “no child left behind” to “every child self-sufficient.”

The moment we begin believing that our young people are capable of planning past next Saturday night and equally capable of working toward a future that means something important to them is the moment the dropout tide turns.

The moment we provide educators with standards and rigorous, career-and-life-focused curriculum that consider the whole child is the moment academics become infused with relevance.

The moment we equip teachers, counselors, and parents with students' individualized 10-year plans is the moment meaningful guidance begins.

The moment we stop dwelling on the weight of the books students carry and instead inspire them to find their wings is the moment they'll seek a kind of elevation that only comes when they know who they are and where they want to go.

The next 10 years will pass in a hurry. Let us act now to make sure our young adults begin planning for what they will do with those years—and who they hope to become along the way.

As a key strategy for dropout prevention, educators, parents, and legislators alike would be wise to encourage all entering high school freshmen to complete a course that culminates with the development of a 10-year career and life plan.

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