

## Is American Education on a Bad Track?

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President [Barack Obama](#) has repeatedly stated a clear educational goal: "We must ensure that every student graduates from high school well prepared for college and a career." That goal is still powerful, but it may be abandoned. Vocational tracks with lowered academic expectations are being pushed in New York state, in Texas, and even, it appears, by the president himself. In his most recent State of the Union address, the president commended Germany's three-track system, where 12-year-old students are sorted by scores. In that same address, he praised a [Brooklyn school](#) designed to prepare students for entry-level technician jobs.

In Texas, a new law will create a system of tiered diplomas. Some ninth grade students will be enrolled in one of two diploma tracks. Those tracked into the easier diploma pathway will later, upon graduation, generally be ineligible for the state's "10 percent rule," which provides automatic college admission to the top of a school's graduating class.

New York's proposal would similarly create three levels of high school diplomas, one of which would be a vocational — or "career and technical education."

This should be troubling to Americans who believe in the public school as a place where equal opportunity thrives. Although vocational classes can be both engaging and worthwhile, sorting 13-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 again 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 largely closed when disadvantaged children are directed toward lower-tier tracks and diplomas. When lawmakers adopt these misguided policies, they open up opportunity gaps that inevitably lead to the achievement gaps that these same lawmakers then decry.

Even in Germany, tracking results in clear damage. Students in the German academic track experience substantial IQ gains, as compared to similar students in vocational tracks.

Consider also the Brooklyn high school praised by the president. P-Tech includes many features that should be applauded – it places two or three teachers in each classroom, it has extended learning time, it has a hands-on approach to learning, and its students have access to the latest technology. But there are also clear reasons to be wary.

P-Tech has only just now completed its second year, making it an odd source for evidence of success. Moreover, P-Tech's approach raises red flags, because it prepares its graduates for entry-level tech jobs, such as answering questions from software users over the phone. The starting salaries for these jobs are less than the salary earned by custodians in the New York City public schools.

The problem, of course, is not the job or even the salary. The problem is a school system requiring young students to make important life choices that foreclose later options.

This comes at an interesting time. We are in the midst of a national movement for standards specifically designed to promote readiness for both career and college, a movement that the president claims to support. Yet as one listens to the praise of the German system, the fawning over a high school that is years away from producing even one graduate, and the infusion of tax dollars to create a new generation of vocational schools, it sounds as if we are turning back equity's clock as we sort and select 13-year-olds into inflexible pathways that deny future opportunities.

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