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OPINION



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Foss: Time to rethink high school

This isn't about lowering standards - it's about putting students in a position to succeed

[Sara Foss](#) | March 18, 2019



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New York State Education Chancellor Betty Rosa, center.

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The other day I found myself chatting with a young coffee shop employee while waiting for my order.

"I'm only 17," she said. "And I work more than anyone else here."

It was a weekday morning, and her comment aroused my curiosity. "Do you go to school?" I asked.

She shuddered, as if recalling a terrible experience. "I got done with all that a year ago," she said. "I'm done with school."

In the long run, this decision to leave high school behind will almost certainly prove to be a mistake, as **dropouts earn less** and are far more likely to end up in prison than their better-educated counterparts.

But what struck me was the complete lack of regret in the young employee's voice. She didn't seem to think she'd made a mistake, and while that could change, it was obvious high school just hadn't worked for her.

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There are kids like this in every school -- an unfortunate fact of life State Education Chancellor Betty Rosa acknowledged in a recent column proposing New York rethink its graduation requirements.

In her column, Rosa noted that the state's high school graduation rate "continues to slowly edge up," but added that "the rate of improvement is far too slow by any objective measure. Simply put, the system is not working too many students -- particularly our most vulnerable students -- are leaving high school without a diploma."

To address this, Rosa is asking a Board of Regents work group to look at the state's graduation requirements and address key questions, such as "What do we want our children to know and be able to do before they graduate we want them to demonstrate such knowledge and skills?"

I'm not sure what will come out of this process, but I do know this: It's long past time to figure out how to make high school work for students at risk of failure and dropping out.

This isn't about watering down standards to make it easier for them -- it's about creating more options so that there's something for everyone, not just those who are college bound or academically inclined.

All schools currently offer some programming for these students, but is it enough? Based on the stubbornly high drop-out rates you see in some districts, I'm going to say, no, it's not.

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One idea, described in an essay in the most recent issue of City Journal, suggests a renewed emphasis on vocational education might be part of the solution.

The essay, written by Oren Cass, suggests that politicians like to give lip service to what's now referred to as career and technical education, but are less keen on investing in it.

He writes, "CTE and 'career pathways' and 'apprenticeships' enjoy bipartisan support, at least verbally; yet over the past 25 years, the primary federal funding stream for such initiatives has declined in value by 30 percent, to billion per year. Federal funding for college, meantime, has risen by 133 percent."

Given how hard it can be to find a decent electrician, plumber, contractor or auto mechanic, you'd think we'd be talking up the trades as an option for people who like to work with their hands.

This isn't about lowering standards - it's about putting students in a position to succeed and develop skills they can take into adulthood and use to support themselves.

It's about recognizing that high school just doesn't work for a lot of students -- and developing programs that will engage these students and keep them in school.

As Cass notes, "For every 100 American students who begin the ninth grade, 18 will fail to graduate high school on time, 25 will earn a diploma but not enroll in college and 29 will enroll in college but fail to complete a degree. Those are sobering numbers, if you think college is the only viable pathway for today's students.

If you don't, they're simply another piece of evidence showing that college isn't for everyone, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

In its willingness to suggest that the way we've been doing high school needs to change, Rosa's op-ed was both bold and radical.

"No doubt that there will be strong feelings on all sides of this issue," she wrote. "Regents exams have been the gold standard for over a century -- and with good reason. But our systems must be continually reviewed, rene occasionally revised in order to best serve our students and the people of this great state."

When I think back on high school, I'm reminded of all those kids who just kind of drifted through, bored and not fully engaged.

At the time, I didn't give these kids a lot of thought -- but now, as an adult, I can see that we need to do more for them. Rosa's call to rethink high school is a step in the right direction.

Reach Gazette columnist **Sara Foss** at sfoss@dailygazette.net. Opinions expressed here are her own and not necessarily the newspaper's.

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