



*This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for our upcoming conversation. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues. Prepared by FOCUS St. Louis.*

## **EDUCATIONAL READINESS: PRE-KINDERGARTEN THROUGH POST SECONDARY EDUCATION**

### **THE VALUE OF A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA**

**F**ailure to ensure students' readiness for postsecondary education and the labor market threatens to slow American productivity, lower our standard of living, and widen the gulf between rich and poor. Today, many students are graduating high school without the skills and knowledge required to be successful in college or the workplace. To be "college ready," students must graduate from high school, take courses that colleges require for admittance, and possess basic literacy skills. On a positive note, though high school graduation rates remained steady between 1991 and 2002, college readiness rates improved, rising from 25 percent to 34 percent. However, this still means that more than 4 in 10 high school graduates are not prepared for college-level courses. Employers estimate that 45 percent of high school graduates do not have the skills necessary to advance beyond entry-level

jobs. Sixty percent of employers rate graduates' skills in grammar, spelling, writing and basic math as only "fair" or "poor." Even high school graduates themselves know that there are gaps in their preparation with 2 in 5 recent graduates who are now in college identifying such gaps and almost half of those not currently enrolled in college agreeing. Currently, as many as 28 percent of college freshmen are immediately placed in remedial courses.

There is a significant economic impact to not preparing students for college and the workplace. Each year, taxpayers pay an estimated \$1 billion to \$2 billion to provide remedial education to students at public universities and community colleges. Deficits in basic skills cost businesses, colleges, and unprepared graduates as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs.

One study indicates that in order to be fully prepared for work and postsecondary education, each student should take a minimum of four years of math and English. Very specific content areas are recommended including Algebra, Geometry, data analysis, and statistics in math, and English courses which include literature, writing, logic and communication skills. Currently, no

states require all students to take all these courses. Missouri and Illinois only require two years of math and three years of English and do not specify the content area that must be covered.

#### **SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- Require all students to take four years of math and four years of English as well as other course requirements which will prepare students for work and college, requiring students (and their parents) to “opt out” of this curriculum rather than “opt in.”
- States should require students to pass an exit exam in order to receive their high school diploma. These tests should assess knowledge and skills related to what is needed to be successful in college and the workplace.
- Colleges and universities should stop admitting students who do not enter their institutions ready for that level of academic performance thereby forcing high schools to do a better job in preparing students.

### **IS POST SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE?**

Some people say that as times have changed, it is even more important now than ever to encourage every young high school graduate to continue their formal education at a four year university. Some people advocate that two year community colleges are perfectly good alternatives to the four year university track. Others would argue that any form of ongoing education, be it two or four year colleges, apprenticeships, or trade school is what is needed for everyone after high school. Yet others might say

that commonly heard, “ school isn’t for everyone,” and think that going to work right after high school may be the best alternative for some young people. Consider, what your expectations about college are for your own children or other family members. Are they the same for everyone else?

Studies have shown that overall, the more education a person has, the more income they generate. Four year graduates make almost twice as much as

non-college graduates. While the difference between hourly or annual salary is striking, the difference in lifetime earnings is even more compelling. Someone with a Bachelor's degree will make \$711,280 more over their lifetime than an individual with a high school diploma. Additionally, the more education one has, the more likely they are to be employed and the faster they find work when they are unemployed. While education does not necessarily guarantee employment, the higher the education level, the more competitive a person is in the job market. There are also societal benefits to having more college graduates. As the U.S. is in the midst of an economic shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, having more college educated citizens may indeed lead to the societal benefits of having more people pay more taxes, being more productive and globally competitive, requiring less government support for individuals and families.

What do Bill Gates (Microsoft founder), Ted Waitt (Gateway Computer founder), and David Geffen (Entertainment industry mogul) have in common? None of them have a college degree. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics national survey of jobs, only 30 percent of all jobs in the U.S. require a college degree. One can point to hundreds of good jobs that are available without higher education or four year degrees. There are several occupations which do not require a four year degree and pay higher wages than most college grads will ever see. Topping the list of careers that require only a high school degree are Air Traffic Controllers who can earn upwards of \$80,000 a year. Other careers that do not require post

secondary education, but pay a livable wage include real estate agents, sales representatives, claims adjusters, inspectors, and criminal investigators. Some people can not afford going to college and do not see the economic tradeoff of being in debt upon graduation as a wise choice. In fact, from a societal standpoint, there are positions which are essential to community functioning in which we all need people without college degrees.

Take the following as an example of how government and private sector may promote programs as alternatives to college. In 2004 the U.S. Department of Labor launched a promotion of skilled trades to high school students to address worker shortages. This focused primarily on the construction trade industry. That same year, a \$2.2 million grant was received by the St. Louis Carpenters Joint Apprenticeship Program to train high school teachers who will pass it along to their students. There are one million new construction jobs expected nationally by 2012.

#### **SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- In order to be more globally competitive, we must create opportunities for everyone to receive a four year college education. State and federal funding resources should focus on this goal.
- Create a societal standard that accepts two year and technical skill training as viable alternatives to four year college. Everyone does benefit from some kind of post secondary education.
- The adage that “some people are not cut out for college” is true. Society must accept this as well as the need for a workforce that is not college educated. Resources need to be spent to ensure that those without postsecondary education are able to make a living wage and contribute productively to society.

#### **HOW CAN EVERY CHILD ENTER SCHOOL “READY TO LEARN?”**

“By the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn” was one of former President George Bush’s national educational goals in 1990. Yet far too often, kindergarten students show up poorly behaved and ill-prepared to learn. In fact, less than half of Missouri children who enter kindergarten can determine “less than” or “more than” when comparing amounts. Just over one third of students entering kindergarten are able to recognize the relationship between letters and their sounds. Factors that assist young children with their readiness to learn are clear and include stable, consistent and loving parental and family relationships, a healthy environment free of toxins such as smoke or lead, effective health and mental health services, and access to high quality child care when parents are away at work. We also know that a child’s future academic success is

largely determined by the quality of their early care and education.

Some say that a primary cause for of this problem is poverty itself. They point to studies showing that more affluent children do better in areas of language development and social emotional skills. Rather than assuming that poor educational outcomes can be corrected through educational reform, supporters of this view say that more attention needs to be paid to the role of non-educational influences such as family income. There is a consistent pattern of income buying access—the more affluent children are two to three times more likely to be enrolled in formal pre-kindergarten settings. Income also buys quality with research showing that even when low-income children are in more formal early learning programs, the quality is poorer.

While acknowledging that family income is a key factor, other research

finds that parents hold the key to promoting school readiness. Parental behavior and activities including reading to children, playing, hugging, and maintaining a consistent routine, stimulate cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development in children long

before they enter school. Yet, only 2 out of 10 parents read to their babies and 45 percent of children over two are read to daily by their parents. Half of parents report not having a daily routines for meals, naps, and bedtimes for their one or two year old child.

#### **SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:**

- States should provide universal pre-kindergarten for all 4 year olds such as what was started in Georgia in 1993. Their program operates like a regular school day—6 ½ hours—and is free to parents. Last year the Georgia Lottery provided the state's pre-K program with \$250 million. Opponents to this say that universal pre-kindergarten is too expensive of an option.
- Increase resources for programs such as Parents As Teachers which promote parents role and responsibility in early childhood education. Parents should be made more aware of how important it is for them to prepare their child for kindergarten. Opponents say that responsibility is not solely parents and that if this route is chosen it must be combined with other efforts to keep schools and communities accountable.
- State government should encourage higher quality day care provision by not providing subsidies for unlicensed child care facilities, requiring higher minimal credentials and qualifications for providers, and enforcing stricter guidelines regarding the number of children in a home without a daycare license (currently, Missouri allows caregivers to provide care to up to four unrelated children and an unlimited number of related children without being licensed). Proponents say that subsidizing some of the worst child care centers in the state is like “flushing money down the toilet.”
- Rather than relying on traditional methods to fund early childhood programs, alternatives such as TIFs, tax abatements, referendums, and private donations to an early child care foundation should be considered and implemented. It is not solely government's responsibility to fund such programs and government finances are strained to the point that this should not be a priority for government spending.