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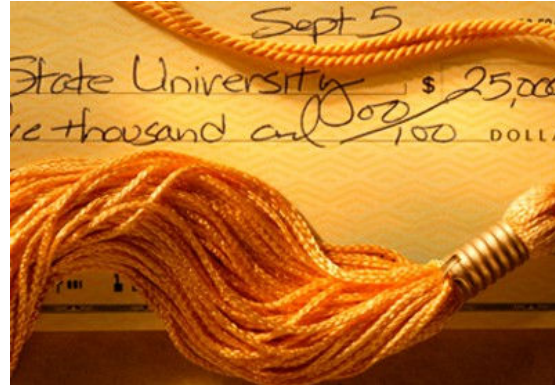
Public High Schools Are Not Doing Their Jobs

 By [JAMES R. HARRIGAN](#), [ANTONY DAVIES](#)

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James R. Harrigan is a fellow of the Institute for Political Economy at Utah State University. Antony Davies is associate professor of economics at Duquesne University and an affiliated senior scholar at the Mercatus Center.

With the start of the new academic year, results from last year's ACT college admissions tests have been made public, and the results are disturbing. The incoming freshman class is woefully unprepared for college. The class of 2016, as a group, failed all four subjects the test assesses: English, math, reading, and science. According to ACT, only 25 percent of students are proficient in all four subjects. Sixty percent came up short in two of the four subject areas, while more than 25 percent failed to demonstrate proficiency in any subject at all. If the point of high school is to prepare students for college, high schools are clearly failing. Unfortunately, this doesn't stop the undereducated masses from heading off to the ivory tower each year.



Today, ready or not, nearly 70 percent of American high school graduates go on to college. By comparison, only 43 percent of Americans attend church regularly, and only 51 percent are married. College, it seems, is far more popular than either God or spouses. As unprepared as they are, students are well-advised to go to college just the same. The time has passed when a high school diploma and a good work ethic were enough for a comfortable life. That's not because life demands more highly educated workers, but because high schools are producing such poorly educated workers.

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If one hopes to land a well-paying job, a four year degree is now a prerequisite. When it comes to basic jobs skills, college is the new high school. As the ACT data show, students walk onto their college campuses needing significant remedial work in the core disciplines of reading, writing, math, and science. The \$40,000 per student price tag for a four-year public high school education is now wasted taxpayer money; another \$80,000 investment is necessary to cover college tuition and fees. And a healthy portion of this investment is spent teaching college students what they should have already learned. Let us be clear: The students who do learn are rewarded in the job market at the expense of those who do not.

What students earn with a high school diploma reflects what they learn in achieving it, and they have been learning and earning considerably less as the years have gone by. The data demonstrates this beyond question. From 1987 to 2007, average income rose for college-educated workers, but fell for everyone else. In 1987 and adjusted for inflation, a college graduate could expect to earn \$1.35 million more than a high school graduate over the course of a career. By 2007, a college graduate could expect to earn \$1.7 million more than a high school graduate. From 1987 to 2007 the inflation-adjusted value of a college degree rose by \$345,000. But of that \$345,000, only \$37,000 was due to the college degree becoming more valuable. The remaining \$308,000 was due to the high school diploma becoming less valuable. Putting this in stark terms, 90 percent of the increase in the value of a college degree is not due to our colleges' becoming ever more stellar, but due to our high schools' becoming ever more abysmal.

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From 1987 to 2007, the expected lifetime earnings of high school graduates fell by 20 percent. The lifetime earnings of college graduates rose by a mere 1 percent. This is the state of things. A college degree is worth quite a lot relative to a high school diploma, but its value has barely budged relative to its own prior worth. It's like feeling richer not because you're earning more money, but because your friends all lost their jobs.

And is there any doubt that, as we ask our colleges to repeat what students should have learned in high school, the value of a college degree will also decline? Seventeen years of education is now the norm (assuming completion of a college degree in four years, which is a big assumption). How long will it take before a master's degree is the necessary price of admission into the job market? What then? A Ph.D.? These things are coming if we continue the current trend.

The way to stop the trend is to allow parents to hold our public schools accountable. They can do this the same way that they hold their cellular providers or grocery stores or car dealerships accountable. If public schools can't educate their children, parents should be free to take their children—and their tax dollars—to schools that can.

Expected Lifetime Income (all figures are in 2007 dollars)				
	No High School	High School Diploma	Some college	College Degree
1987	\$1,000,000	\$1,500,000	\$1,860,000	\$2,870,000
2007	\$670,000	\$1,200,000	\$1,530,000	\$2,910,000
Change	-33%	-20%	-18%	1%

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