



Eduardo Padrón

# UPFRONT

**DID YOU EVER HEAR OF THE “SOME KIDS” THEORY of American education? It’s an age-old prescription, an unspoken doctrine that has held sway over the fortunes of young people for a long, long time. Here’s how it goes: Some kids are really smart and will go to college. Some kids aren’t so smart and should head for the workforce. Some kids aren’t**

really smart at all and should join the military or do the menial work no one else will do. And so on.

This approach originated at a time very unlike the era we now confront. The “some kids” strategy might have actually offered a measure of practicality back in 1920 when teenagers across the heartland pitched in at harvest time and city kids joined the commercial hustle that defined the post-war years.

But those days are over. Unions have been backed into a corner of the American workplace, along with the apprentice and mentoring programs that led to solid middle class livelihoods. We are a different nation, swept up in a global marketplace that has relocated hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs to Asia, South America and Africa.

The communications revolution has provoked a seismic shift in the marketplace, and with it, the very nature of work has changed. Yet when it comes to preparing our people, young and not so young, to be viable in this new world of work, our approach is trapped in a time warp. We’re sticking band-aids on a hemorrhage.

We should be shouting from the rooftops about the crisis of learning in our country. Under 70 percent of high school students are graduating today, and fewer than half

earn a diploma in many urban school systems. A few clear-headed K-12 educators have thrown off the antiquated “some kids” approach and begun to demand that every student prepare to attend college. The Carnegie Corporation, Gates Foundation and others are offering resources to steer a new path, but realistically, they are hardly turning the wheel of this aged vessel.

A two-tiered society of rich and poor is unfolding before us, and the primary tool to re-energize the vital middle class is in a tailspin. For those young students who do turn the corner toward a college degree, the immense cost thrust upon them and their families is too often unbearable.

Higher education is dramatically confused about access. The elite universities, more than ever, are citadels of the wealthy while the states’ flagship public institutions are striving to imitate these private enclaves. Harvard and Yale alone have amassed endowments totaling \$57 billion, while a record 76 colleges and universities have

achieved billion dollar holdings in the last year. And Congress is now “threatening” to require these schools to spend a minimum of 5 percent of their wealth on financial aid. Confused indeed, and occurring as both federal and state support continues to wane for the millions of qualified low-income students hoping for a chance at prosperity. While local community colleges hold the door open for the tide of students streaming in, government support is embarrassingly depleted.

Chances are we will muddle along in our present disarray. That will not, however, diminish the crisis before us and the enormous cost we will pay as communities and a nation if we continue to avoid the obvious. We need a dramatic turnaround. We need to understand how imperative it is to prioritize learning in this country. And when we understand, we need to shout it from the rooftops. **H**

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WHEN IT COMES TO PREPARING FOR THE NEW WORLD OF WORK, WE ARE STUCK IN A TIME WARP.



Universal high school attendance wasn’t even required until the 1950s, in great part because avenues into the economic mainstream remained open to those without diplomas. Pittsburgh steel, Detroit assembly lines, the hustling streets of the Manhattan garment industry, Carolina textiles and more rushed to embrace young workers.