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Commentary: What's Wrong With American High Schools?

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Our high schools are obsolete.

By obsolete, I don't just mean that they are broken, flawed and underfunded -- although I can't argue with any of those descriptions.

What I mean is that they were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age. Today, even when they work exactly as designed, our high schools cannot teach our kids what they need to know.

Until we design high schools to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting -- even ruining -- the lives of millions of Americans every year. Frankly, I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow.

The idea behind the old high school system was that you could train an adequate workforce by sending only a small fraction of students to college, and that the other kids either couldn't do college work or didn't need to.

Sure enough, today only one-third of our students graduate from high school ready for college, work and citizenship.

The others, most of whom are low-income and minority students, are tracked into courses that won't ever get them ready for any of those things -- no matter how well the students learn or how hard the teachers work.

In district after district across the country, wealthy white kids are taught Algebra II, while low-income minority kids are taught how to balance a checkbook.

This is an economic disaster. In the international competition to have the best supply of workers who can communicate clearly, analyze information and solve complex problems, the United States is falling behind. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates in the industrialized world.

In math and science, our fourth-graders rank among the top students in the world, but our 12th-graders are near the bottom. China has six times as many college graduates in engineering.

As bad as it is for our economy, it's even worse for our students. Today, most jobs that pay enough to support a family require some post-secondary education. Yet only half of all students who enter high school enroll in a post-secondary institution.

High school dropouts have it worst of all. Only 40% have jobs. They are nearly four times more likely to be arrested than their friends who stayed in high school. And they die young because of years of poor healthcare, unsafe living conditions and violence.

We can put a stop to this. We designed these high schools; we can redesign them.

We have to do away with the outdated idea that only some students need to be ready for college and that the others can walk away from higher education and still thrive in our 21st century society. We need a new design that realizes that all students can do rigorous work.

There is mounting evidence in favor of this approach. Take the Kansas City, Kan., public school district, where 79% of students are minorities and 74% live below the poverty line. For years, the district struggled with high dropout rates and low test scores. In 1996, it adopted a school-reform model that, among many other steps, requires all students to take college-prep courses. Since then, the district's graduation rate has climbed more than 30 percentage points.

Kansas City is not an isolated example. Exciting work is underway to improve high schools in such cities as Oakland, Chicago and New York.

All of these schools are organized around three powerful principles: Ensure that all students are given a challenging curriculum that prepares them for college or work; that their courses clearly relate to their lives and goals; and that they are surrounded by adults who push them to achieve.

This kind of change is never easy. But I believe there are three ways that political and business leaders at every level can help build momentum for change in our schools.

First, declare that all students must graduate from high school ready for college, work and citizenship. Every politician and chief executive in the country should speak up for the belief that children need to take courses that prepare them for college.

Second, publish the data that measure our progress toward that goal. We already have some data that show us the extent of the problem. But we need to know more: What percentage of students are dropping out? What percentage are graduating? And this data must be broken down by race and income.

Finally, every state should commit to turning around failing schools and opening new ones. When the students don't learn, the school must change. Every state needs a strong intervention strategy to improve struggling schools.

If we keep the system as it is, millions of children will never get a chance to fulfill their promise because of their ZIP Code, their skin color or their parents' income. That is offensive to our values.

Every kid can graduate ready for college. Every kid should have the chance.

Let's redesign our schools to make it happen.