

Early career

decisions

limit
options

Everyone knows there are problems with the US educational system. In many cases, US students perform poorly in international testing and high school graduates show up for jobs unable to handle basic addition and subtraction. Some cannot even read.

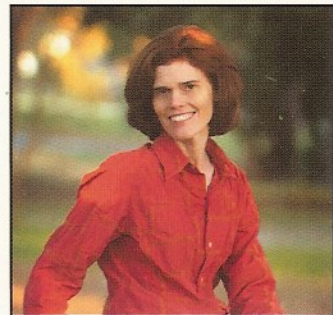
There are many opinions on what to do about these problems. One approach is to determine a child's aptitudes at an early age and "track" them early, sometimes beginning in elementary school. For example, parents can now choose a performing arts, science or language school. Although a few courses in other areas are provided, the majority of the focus is on specialization. Early specialization is common in Latin America, Europe and in some parts of Asia. By ninth grade, children have either chosen a career that requires science and math, business, social sciences or the arts.

Although this sounds like the perfect way to solve many problems with US education, there are difficulties with this approach. By the time young people enter the university, many have limited choices based on decisions they made before they entered high school.

At 13, 14 and 15, children are still developing and changing. In a "tracking system", it is difficult for children who choose the wrong career track to go on and fulfill their dreams. For example, someone who is passionate about art at 14 may decide at 18 he or she wants to become an architect. This area of study requires mathematics and science abilities not normally included in an art, history track. It is equally tragic for a person who loves science and math to fail to develop the creative, artistic part of their brain. The best engineers and scientists are those who can creatively solve problems and can communicate in an eloquent, visual way.

So what is the best solution?

The US should change its approach and realize nothing is perfect. We should take the good elements from each educational system and create something better. Continue to allow children to delay career decisions until they have enough background to make a good choice. Then strengthen the basic skills curricula, so our high school graduates have the skills necessary to compete with international students. In addition, continue to encourage US children to explore as many things as possible through extra curricular programs. This should give us creative, well-adjusted young people who can succeed in our increasingly complex world.



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