

Start It Earlier, and End It Earlier | Leon Botstein

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President Obama's praise for the six-year high school in Brooklyn, known as P-Tech, is welcome, because our nation sorely needs educational innovation. Still, a word of caution is in order. The school, to its credit, offers a two-year college degree at the end of six years. But why follow an outmoded high school model and keep students longer in a structure that is failing?

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The school Obama singled out is unabashedly vocational, designed and supported by IBM. It follows a model pioneered in Europe for apprenticeship-style vocational education. The larger problem, however, is that our capacity to predict the future of jobs, particularly in information technology and health care, is poor. America seems not to be able to maintain a stable manufacturing base. The pace of technological change is rapid, rendering the competitiveness of skills taught even in our finest undergraduate engineering schools valid only for a short period. The jobs may be there for recent graduates, but what will happen when their skills become obsolete in a decade? Will the graduates of this extended high school be able to adapt and remain employed?

No doubt P-Tech is an improvement on the largely dysfunctional character of most urban high schools. But to lift the educational level of students of high school age, we must change much more.

First, high school should start and end earlier. Middle school and junior high school need to be discarded. All high school education should start in the seventh grade and end at the completion of 10th grade. We waste our adolescents' time in school. Properly structured and taught, much more could be accomplished in less time.

Second, the curriculum that begins in the 11th year, which should be the first year of post-secondary education, needs to be taught not just by teachers but by professionals: biologists, physicists, mathematicians, computer scientists and the like, just as is the case in our universities. A vocational focus is laudable, but the curriculum needs to stress the most long-term useful education: a fundamental understanding of science, exposure to the works of the imagination and training in the varied skills of critical analysis. These enable graduates to adapt to new ideas and practices.

Furthermore, schooling should not be linked to corporations, or to a single employer or current technology, even if the sponsor is IBM or Google. They too, like General Electric and Kodak before them, will downsize, disappear and be replaced.

High school is perhaps the most troubled and poorest-performing sector in American education, as declining rates of completion suggest. It needs to be shortened, not lengthened. Adolescents today mature physically and socially sooner than in previous generations. We must open educational opportunities for 16-year-olds that are designed for adults, from which they themselves can choose. These need to stand apart from high schools. They can be colleges or high-level vocational programs that combine work experience with classroom learning. At 16, not 18, our young adults need to study with highly trained professionals in settings free from the restrictive and infantilizing culture of our high schools.