

editor's note



IF YOU VISIT MY SON'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, YOU'LL SEE A BIG SIGN FOR "NO EXCUSES UNIVERSITY" EVEN BEFORE YOU ENTER THE BUILDING. The school strongly advocates this program designed to "promote a comprehensive model of college readiness to all students the moment they begin elementary school."

Participating schools have the goal of sending every single one of their students to college. The students all wear "No Excuses University" t-shirts on Fridays, and each classroom adopts a college to learn about. During the school year students are constantly reinforced about the need to go to college.

While I'm a strong supporter of higher education, I can't help but feel this is an incredibly misguided program and symptomatic of deep issues within our public education system.

In today's society, where it's not unusual for a college graduate to have \$50,000 to \$100,000 (and even that might be for "only" a public school!) in debt—and where too often, many graduates are not able to find a job outside the service economy—why aren't we more strongly encouraging (and preparing) students to enter what we used to call "the trades?"

According to the American Welding Society (AWS), we're looking at a shortage of around 200,000 welders—an opinion echoed by the Fabricators and Manufacturers Association (FMA). When I talk with fabricators the shortage of trained machinery operators, even in today's depressed economy, is a constant concern. Yet vocational training doesn't even seem to be on the radar for many of our public school educators.

Mark Phillips, a professor emeritus in secondary education at San Francisco State University, began a recent article in the *Washington Post* by explaining: "I was hired by Norway's Ministry of Education to train vocational education teachers some years ago. Having myself attended a comprehensive high school where vocational students were those who couldn't make it academically, it was eye-opening to be in a country where vocational education had high prestige, was well funded and included

students who could have gone to medical school if that had been their preference."

In contrast, he finds the U.S. denigrates those who are interested in the trades. "This bias against vocational education is dysfunctional. It is destructive to our children. It is also destructive to our society. Many of the skills most needed to compete in the global market of the 21st century are technical skills that fall into the technical/vocational area. The absence of excellence in many technical and vocational fields is also costing us economically as a nation." As Walt Gardner wrote in the April 9 edition of *Education Week*: "Career and technical education, as it is now called, is less expensive and less wasteful than the current obsession with emphasizing college for everyone. But don't try telling that to policy makers. Employers have loudly complained that they can't find skilled workers for jobs made available as baby boomers retire. They say that too many graduates with bachelor's degrees lack the wherewithal to step in to fill open places.

Yes, we need engineers and doctors. But we also need welders and machine operators. I urge all of you to contact your local school boards. Why aren't we preparing students to help rebuild America?

As Dan DiMicco, chairman and CEO of Nucor Corporation, strongly stated at the 2012 NASCC: The Steel Conference: "It's up to all of you to make a difference." A service-based economy is unsustainable and we need to reinvigorate the country's manufacturing sector. "As a nation, we need to get creative making and building things again."

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