

INERTIA, NOT EDUCATION

On the Misassignment of a Generation

AUGUST BROOKS

We are educating children for a world that no longer exists, using a model that made sense in an industrial economy and pretending it still fits a knowledge-and-skills one. It doesn't. The cost of that mismatch is enormous, and most of it is not economic. It is psychological.

Start with a plain question. When did you last use the quadratic formula? Not recognize it. Not vaguely recall it existing. Use it, outside a classroom, on an actual problem. For most people the answer is never — and not because they failed. Because the system demanded mastery of abstractions that were never going to touch the life they would actually live.

The Number

This is usually where the argument gets waved off as anti-intellectualism, so let me put a measurement under it.

Michael Handel, a sociologist at Northeastern, ran a survey of roughly 2,300 American workers across the occupational range — managers and technicians, salespeople, factory and service workers — asking not what their jobs supposedly required but what they actually did. Ninety-four percent used some math. Only about two-thirds used fractions, decimals, or percentages. And only twenty-two percent used any mathematics more advanced than adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing — most commonly simple algebra. Nineteen percent reached the level of Algebra I. Nine percent reached Algebra II. Around five percent used calculus.

I want to be fair to Handel, because he is not making my argument. He has been explicit that he is not saying students should take less math. He is questioning a narrower and better-supported claim: that pushing everyone through more advanced math makes them more employable. His data says it does not.

But hold the numbers next to the requirement. We compel essentially every teenager through a sequence built for the fraction of them who will use it, and we spend hundreds of hours per student doing it. Multiply that across a nation and across generations and the result is not rig-

or. It is billions of human hours spent on material that will be discarded within a year of the final exam.

In any other organization this would be an obvious defect. A company that trained its entire workforce for a role ten percent of them would ever hold would be considered badly run. In education we call it standards.

Misassignment Is Not Incapacity

Here is the part that does the real damage, and it is not financial.

When a student struggles with material that was misassigned to them, we do not conclude that the assignment was wrong. We conclude that the student is deficient. They receive that verdict at fourteen, in front of their peers, from the institution their society has designated as the authority on what they are worth.

Most of them believe it. And a large number carry it for the rest of their lives — not as an opinion about algebra, but as a settled fact about their own intelligence. They will decline things they could have done well, decades later, on the strength of a judgment that was actually about a scheduling decision made by people who never met them.

That is the cost I care most about. We are not producing failed mathematicians. We are producing capable adults who have been convinced they are slow.

The Problem Is Not Math. It Is Uniformity.

Math is essential — for the people who need it. Engineers need it. Scientists need it. Analysts and machinists and anyone building anything that has to hold weight need it, and often need more of it than they get.

The defect is the assumption that human aptitude runs along a single axis, that everyone must advance at the same rate toward the same destination, and that any other route is a lesser one. No other domain of human excellence works this way. We do not make every child train for the Olympics before they may choose a sport. We do not require every musician to master violin before touching a piano. Only in education do we hold a single path and treat deviation from it as failure.

And the consequence is not just the misassigned student. It is also the gifted one, sitting through a pace built for the median, learning that school is a place where you wait.

What The Alternative Actually Looks Like

Several advanced economies concluded a long time ago that dignity does not come from identical outcomes. It comes from alignment.

Around mid-adolescence, students choose among structured routes based on interest and demonstrated aptitude. Some go deep into academic study. Others enter technical and trade pathways with real apprenticeships attached. Others go into digital, creative, or commercial training. Everyone gets the same core foundation first. Nobody is told their route is the consolation prize. And critically, students finish with a certification, documented experience, and an identifiable place in the economy.

Compare that with graduating at eighteen holding a diploma and no marketable skill, being told you are already behind unless you take on debt for more schooling, and then being described as unmotivated when adulthood goes badly. Meanwhile entire sectors cannot fill positions — electricians, mechanics, technicians, energy and grid workers, IT and network staff — roles that cannot be offshored and that frequently pay better than the degrees we pushed people toward. The jobs exist. The people exist. The pipeline between them is broken.

The Objection That Has To Be Answered

Tracking has a real failure mode, and pretending otherwise would make this an advertisement rather than an argument.

Where students are sorted early, sorted by others, and sorted permanently, tracking reproduces the class structure it inherited. Children of educated parents land in the academic route; children of the poor and of recent immigrants land in the vocational one; and the system converts an accident of birth into a credential that looks like merit. That criticism has been made forcefully inside the very countries most often held up as models, and it is not paranoid. It is what happens by default.

So the design has to answer it explicitly:

Chosen, not assigned. The student and family decide. Aptitude data informs the choice; it does not make it.

Permeable in both directions, permanently. A technical student who wants university at twenty-two gets a real route there, not a theoretical one. If the door only opens one way, it is a caste system with a nicer name.

Late enough to be about the student. Sorting at ten measures the parents. Sorting in mid-adolescence at least measures the person.

Core floor preserved for everyone. Reading well. Clear writing. Arithmetic and practical statistics. How money and debt actually work. Civic structure. And logic and reasoning as a graded subject rather than a hoped-for side effect.

Audited for disparate impact, publicly. If the routes sort by income or ethnicity rather than by aptitude and interest, that shows up in the numbers, and the numbers get published. A reform this consequential should be as checkable as the thing it replaces.

Meet those five conditions and the objection is answered. Fail any one of them and the critics are right.

What It Would Buy

I will state the upside in the conditional, because these are projections rather than measurements, and I would rather be believed than impressive.

Debt loads should fall — not through forgiveness, but because fewer people need to borrow in order to become useful. Workforce entry moves earlier for those who choose it, which compounds across a lifetime of earnings. Employers stop paying to teach from zero. Bottlenecked trades expand toward the demand that already exists.

And the part that is not measurable but matters more: a nineteen-year-old who is genuinely competent at something real carries himself differently than one who has been told for four years that he is behind. Confidence is not a slogan. It is what people have when they can do something. A society with more competent adults in it is calmer, harder to manipulate, and far less interested in resentment.

School stops being an endurance ritual and becomes a launchpad. Attendance improves when relevance exists. You do not have to threaten people into learning something they can see the use of.

The academically gifted go further and faster, freed from a pace built for averages. The practically gifted get momentum instead of remediation. That is raising the floor and the ceiling with the same reform — not by making people identical, but by aligning what they are asked to do with what they are.

The Actual Claim

This is not about lowering standards. It is about raising relevance.

We have optimized education for credentials rather than competence. We reward symbolic achievement over usable skill, and then act surprised when the symbols do not convert into a functioning economy or a functioning adult.

We are not short of intelligence. We are not short of talent. We are short of a structure that knows what to do with either.

What we are running now is not education. It is inertia — a system defended mainly because it is the one we already have. And the longer we defend it on those grounds, the more damage we quietly agree to treat as normal.

THE CANONICAL VERSION OF THIS ESSAY IS AT [AUGUSTBROOKS.COM/ESSAYS/INERTIA-NOT-EDUCATION](https://augustbrooks.com/essays/inertia-not-education)