

For the record, my name is John Larson, and I am a High School Language Arts teacher from Hermiston, currently on a leave of absence in order to serve as the vice president of the Oregon Education Association.

As a language arts teacher, I work with a large variety of students and with a wide range of skills in reading and writing. In fact, during my final few years in Hermiston I taught AP Language and Composition in the morning and reading instruction to seniors who read between a 3rd and 7th grade level in the afternoon. I confronted unique challenges in both of these areas. In the AP courses students were capable of reading and writing at a college level, so it was my job to help them hone their skills for the future. In the reading course, however, I was tasked with diagnosing reading deficiencies and developing individualized plans to help students advance their ability to comprehend writing at level that would allow them to be successful later in life. Many of these students would leave my classroom at the end of the day and go straight to a job where they would work until midnight or later in order to help support their families. Every student in each of these classes had different strengths and weaknesses. None of them fit into a single mold.

As often happens in a rural school district, due to a lack of substitutes, I was frequently asked to fill in for another instructor during my preparation period. My favorite places to sub were always in the shop or in the agriculture classes. This is not because I am particularly adept in either of these two areas. In fact, I'm somewhat clumsy and have no expertise in either building things or growing things. My students, on the other hand, are. The same students with whom I spent an hour a day urging them to correct their work, here were shining stars. I had the opportunity here to connect with my students on a level where they were the expert, and they could speak with pride over a cabinet they had built, or, in the case of the ag classes, explain to me why a particular crop would grow well in one type of soil but not in another.

I am sharing with you a description of my interactions with students to exemplify why 40-40-20, while well meaning, is simply impractical in a school setting. Number one, it implies some sort of hierarchy of skills. It suggests that an education at a four year college or university should be preferable to that of a Community College or of someone entering the work force straight out of school. What we know to be true in Public Education, however, is that there is no prescription for what defines a "successful" student, and we should not have some sort of artificial mechanism to route students onto a path that is not right for them.

Hermiston is quite proud of its career and technical education program. You simply need to walk into the building to see the banners announcing the students' achievement in these areas. Many of the students involved in these programs will attend a community college to get further training in one of these areas. Still more of these students will enter the workforce directly or be routed into an apprentice program. Still others will decide to join the military. It is our responsibility as educators to have meaningful conversations with students and help them achieve their dreams. There are plenty of students who, when exiting Hermiston Schools, will be employed in family wage jobs. We may not end up sending 40% of our students to a four-year university, but does that mean we have been unsuccessful with our students. Instead, we should be measuring how well we have guided students into careers where they will be happy and earn a wage where they can support their families. For these reasons, I urge you to rethink the idea around 40-40-20