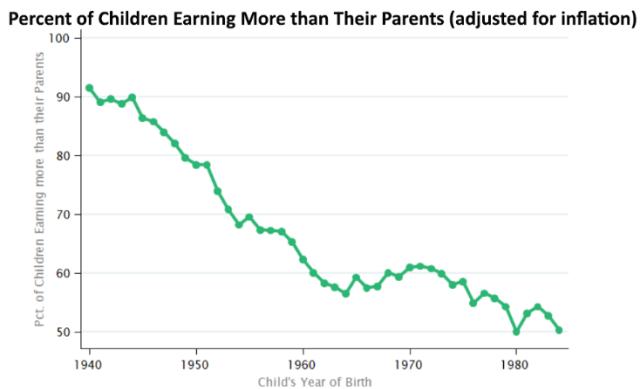


In pursuit of the American Dream

Many consider the American Dream fully realized when adult children fare better financially than their parents. For decades, this had been a reality for most families across our great nation. In fact, almost 90% of children born in the 1940's, when adjusted for inflation, grew up to earn more than their parents. However, as researcher Raj Chetty points out, over the past fifty years this measure of the American Dream has been in precipitous decline. Remarkably, using the same metrics, only 50% of adults today will grow up to earn more than their parents, and future changes to the workforce will likely see this trend continue to fall unless we act.



Poverty and education play a remarkable causal role in these sobering statistics. In fact, more than half of today's adults who grew up in families with lower levels of income and education earn less than \$20K per year at age 30, an amount well below what is deemed sufficient by economists. Sadly, only about 1 in 10 are able to break free, leaving the vast percentage of their peers stuck in generational poverty.

You may be surprised to learn that it was not simply the attainment of a high school diploma that served to break the cycle and lift the few out of poverty. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, median wages for workers with a high school diploma or less has fallen by 11% from 1979 to 2019, while they rose by 15% for those with a 4-year degree.

This is not to say that a formal bachelor's degree is the only option to beat the odds and achieve the American Dream. Similar research has shown students who access apprenticeships, technical institutions and other trades-based pathways, likewise experience a higher propensity to achieve steady financial footing in adulthood. Sadly, too few of our nation's students are seeking higher education opportunities post earning their high school diploma. In fact, for every 100 ninth graders in the US, only 20 have earned a 4-year degree six years after graduation.

Many hypothesize that one of the reasons graduates don't attend some form of post-high school education is that they are able to find ready employment, albeit often in lower-skill but higher-demand jobs. Unfortunately for these recent graduates, research from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BOLS) project that in a few short years, many of their jobs may be eliminated, replaced, or provide little upward mobility to achieve financial security in adulthood. McKinsey estimates that 1 in 4 jobs, many of them held now by high school diploma bearers, will be obsolete within seven years due to automation and artificial intelligence. An estimated 39 million Americans could lose their jobs due to automation by 2030 where an anticipated 2000 work activities across 800 professions will become obsolete.

In just five short years, 55% of high growth/high wage jobs will require a bachelor's degree, 20% an associate's degree or some other post-secondary education/apprenticeship, leaving less than 1 in 4 high growth/high wage jobs available for those with only a high school diploma. What are the higher wage jobs that are anticipated to grow in the near future you may ask? According to BOLS, those requiring expertise, those where interaction with stakeholders is necessary, those which manage people - think

computer and information sciences, health care providers, professionals/executives, skilled craftsmen, and educators.

In Walla Walla Public Schools we are extremely proud of our graduation rates, where nearly 95% of our students earn a high school diploma, well above the state average. These numbers have increased sharply over this last decade, especially for our Hispanic/Latino students whose rates exceed 91%, 13% higher than the state average. Unfortunately, a high school diploma may no longer be enough for the vast majority of our graduates if they are to achieve the American Dream as commonly defined. For that reason, our Walla Walla School Board has adopted rigorous post-high school aspirations in Vision 2030, the district's new strategic plan.

One of the district's essential goals for Vision 2030 rests upon the importance of relevant and rigorous educational experiences, committing to ensure that every senior graduates with 21st century-skills and a post-secondary plan. While the district already boasts 50 career and technical courses, over 30 Advanced Placement, honors and College in the High School classes, and nearly two dozen opportunities to earn industry certifications while still in high school, we are committed to doing even more.

Access to even more rigorous courses aligned to student interests and future industry pathways are being developed. Enhanced partnerships with local business and employers is taking place in order to increase worksite learning and internship opportunities for students. Continued collaboration and coordination with our region's higher education partners is helping to streamline student access, accession and opportunities to earn post high school certificates and degrees locally. And improved partnerships with families will ensure parents are actively involved in their child's high school course selection and graduation pathway plans.

Collectively, these efforts will help ensure that the American Dream is not just a possibility but a reality for each and every student in Walla Walla as we work together to realize our vision towards Developing Washington's Most Sough-after Graduates.

Dr. Wade Smith
Superintendent of Schools