

-Lester Thurow, "Education and Economic Equality" The key question isn't whether employers care a lot about grades and diplomas, but why. The simple, popular answer is that schools teach their students useful job skills. Low grades, no diploma, few skills. This simple, popular answer is not utterly wrong. Literacy and numeracy are crucial in most occupations. Yet the education-as-skills story-better known to social scientists as "human capital theory"-dodges puzzling questions. First and foremost: from kindergarten on, students spend thousands of hours studying subjects irrelevant to the modern labor market. How can this be? Why do English classes focus on literature and poetry instead of business and technical writing? Why do advanced math classes bother with proofs almost no student can follow? When will the typical student use history? Trigonometry? Art? Music? Physics? "Physical Education"? Spanish? French? Latin! (High schools still teach it, believe it or not.) The class clown who snarks, "What does this have to do with real life?," is on to something. The disconnect between curriculum and job market has a banal explanation: educators teach what they know-and most have as little firsthand knowledge of the modern workplace as I do. Yet this merely amplifies the puzzle. If schools boost students' income by teaching useful job skills, why do they entrust students' education to people so detached from the real world? How are educators supposed to foster our students' ability to do the countless jobs we can't do ourselves? Anyone who thinks I exaggerate the gap between the skills students learn and the skills workers use can look at the current graduation requirements for my alma mater, Granada Hills High School (now Granada Hills Charter High School). Students need four years of English, two years of algebra, two years of the same foreign language, two years of physical education, and a year in each of the following: geometry, biology, physical science, world history, American history, economics/government, and a visual or performing art. Students also have to complete ten to fourteen elective classes. If you fail more than two classes, you do not graduate. Passing all this coursework serves one practical function: college entry. Granada's high school graduation requirements almost perfectly match admission requirements for 8 the University of California and California State University systems. But what additional practical function do these requirements serve? For college-bound students, the honest answer is "not much"; few college graduates use higher mathematics, foreign languages, 9 history, or the arts on the job. For students who aren't college bound, the honest answer is "virtually none." If you don't go to college, your job almost certainly won't require knowledge of geometry, French, world history, or drama.