

# *Why Some Schools Are Rethinking 'College for All'*

The idea that every student should aim for a four-year college motivated a bipartisan movement for decades. Now even enthusiastic promoters of the idea are reconsidering it.



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**By Dana Goldstein**

Dana Goldstein visited two high schools with a new focus on career-planning: KIPP Academy Lynn in Massachusetts and the Bronx Early College Academy in New York City.

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For three decades, “college for all” was an American rallying cry. The goal inspired a generation of educators, offered a north star to students and united political figures from George W. Bush to Bernie Sanders.

Thousands of new K-12 schools were founded to achieve this ambitious vision, often focused on guiding low-income students toward bachelor’s degrees.

Even after decades of bipartisan effort and billions of dollars spent, about 40 percent of students who start college never finish, often leaving with life-altering debt. Across the political spectrum, higher education institutions are less respected and trusted by the public, whether because of sticker shock, perceived left-wing bias or doubts about their ability to prepare students for the job market.

In response, some high schools that once pushed nearly all students toward four-year colleges are now guiding teenagers toward a wider range of choices, including trade schools, apprenticeships, two-year degrees or the military.

Among them are schools that are part of KIPP, the nation's largest charter school network.



A common area celebrating the graduating class of 2025 at KIPP Academy Lynn. Sophie Park for The New York Times

For many years after KIPP's founding in 1994, the network was known for its single-minded focus on getting low-income Black and Hispanic teenagers to and through four-year colleges.

"College starts in kindergarten" was a KIPP mantra. Classrooms were named after the colleges their teachers attended. On senior "signing days," students proudly marched across auditorium stages, waving the banners of their future alma maters.

But over the past five years, KIPP has been part of a national rethinking of college for all.

KIPP is "broadening the celebration" of what students can do and achieve after high school, said Shavar Jeffries, chief executive of the KIPP Foundation, which supports 278 KIPP public schools across the country.

And KIPP is not the only college-focused education player newly experimenting with career-centered learning.



"I don't want to have an outrageous amount of loans," said KIPP Academy Lynn senior Moriah Berry, 18. "I want to be really realistic." Sophie Park for The New York Times

Ten years ago, the Geneva-based International Baccalaureate Organization started a "career program" as an alternative to its traditional "diploma program," which is well-known as a pathway to elite college admissions. The I.B. career option, while

still small, has grown exponentially over the past five years, and now serves more than 8,000 American students.

The shifts can bring more than a little bit of discomfort for many highly educated educators, who are unlikely to forget the doors that their own college and graduate degrees opened. Mr. Jeffries of KIPP, for example, is a graduate of Duke and Columbia Law School.

And young Americans with a bachelor's degree earned a median salary of \$60,000 last year, compared with \$40,000 for those with just a high school diploma.

Mr. Jeffries acknowledged that some of KIPP's moves have been influenced by trends in philanthropy and politics. Business leaders have shown a strong enthusiasm in recent years for alternatives to traditional college.

Many politicians and wealthy donors to education causes like KIPP are concerned about student dropout rates and ballooning debt. They have also been influenced by famous tech executive dropouts, by their own personal distaste for campus left-wing activism and by the anti-college populism of the Trump movement.



The Bronx Early College Academy in New York offers International Baccalaureate's career program.

Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Mr. Jeffries said schools like KIPP's are trying to walk a line between encouraging students to strive for a four-year degree and also introducing them to alternatives.

"We have to be very, very careful, particularly for younger people of color," Mr. Jeffries said, noting that many apprenticeship and job-training programs are expensive, and may not have a proven track record of placing students in well-paid jobs.

While KIPP is enthusiastic about directing students toward what Mr. Jeffries called "credible" job-training programs, "the data is clear," he said. "A college degree opens up more opportunities."

At KIPP Academy Lynn, in a working-class corner of coastal Massachusetts, almost all students still consider four-year colleges, and about three-quarters enroll. But now, the conversation does not end there.

In the fall of her senior year, Moriah Berry, 18, realized that her biggest fear, she said, was “being broke.”



The principal of the Bronx Early College Academy, Yvette Rivera, said she embraced International Baccalaureate’s newer career track as an additional option for students. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

To avoid that fate, Moriah has been working with her teachers and counselors to create plans — and backup plans — for life after she graduates from high school.

Her big goal is an undergraduate degree in biochemistry or physics. But Moriah is also considering an accelerated, three-year bachelor’s degree from a private trade school, which would qualify her to work as a radiology technician. And because the

\$56,000 annual tuition there could turn out to be prohibitive, even with aid, she is also looking at two-year programs that offer certification in the same field.

"I don't want to have an outrageous amount of loans," said Moriah, who lives with her mother, a nurse. "I want to be really realistic."

This school year, for the first time, all KIPP juniors and seniors across the country are enrolled in a two-year seminar called College Knowledge and Career Success.

At KIPP Academy Lynn, juniors research career paths — orthodontist, C.I.A. agent, software engineer. Teachers also work to demystify the college application and financial aid process, explaining basics like the difference between a grant and a loan. Students look critically at specific college and training programs, examining their graduation and job-placement rates.



Eleventh-grade students taking an I.B. Spanish class at Bronx Early College Academy. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

During their senior year, students fill out applications, and then do financial planning for the years ahead.

The work is pragmatic. KIPP students are overwhelmingly from low-income households, and often the first in their families who might go to college. They earn bachelor's degrees at about double the rate of other low-income students nationally, according to a 2023 Mathematica study. While more than three quarters of students who attended KIPP for middle and high school enrolled in college, only 40 percent graduated within five years.

KIPP Massachusetts has tried to adjust to that reality, renaming its "college counseling" team as "match counseling." It also removed the requirement for a college degree from job listings for "persistence advisers," counselors who work with recent graduates to troubleshoot college, career, mental health and financial challenges.

Similarly, the Bronx Early College Academy, which offers International Baccalaureate's diploma program, is also shifting away from pushing all of its students, who are largely from low-income families, into four-year colleges.

The I.B. program is well-known for its focus on liberal arts rigor and philosophical thinking. Its most famous course, called "theory of knowledge," focuses on epistemological questions in politics, culture and the arts.

But 18 months after graduation, about a fifth of B.E.C.A. alumni were not enrolled in any sort of college, according to data from 2021 to 2024.

"We didn't have the construct to talk to kids about anything other than college," said Yvette Rivera, the school's principal. "But we don't want to waste kids' time. We don't have a lot of time, especially in communities like ours."





The I.B. career program introduces students to real-world careers. This winter, Danessa Ayala, 17, a senior at Bronx Early College Academy, worked a paid externship for a local arts nonprofit. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Five years ago, Ms. Rivera embraced I.B.'s newer career track as an additional option. The signature course is called "personal and professional skills." Students take on big ethical questions, a hallmark of the I.B. approach, but also focus on professional writing, public speaking and disagreeing respectfully. Learning about careers is a central part of the program.

This fall, Danessa Ayala, a 17-year-old senior, was considering three disparate paths with vastly different educational requirements: automotive mechanics, real estate or becoming a detective. Her parents, a security guard and office administrator, said they would support whatever their daughter chose, but otherwise had not offered much detailed guidance.

After Danessa was assigned at school to research her career interests, she realized that it could take many years for a police officer to rise to detective. She began to focus in on real estate, construction and home renovation.

This winter, Danessa worked a paid externship for a local arts nonprofit, earning \$16 an hour. She gained some familiarity with woodworking, which she knows can be a big part of home renovation projects.

She is now applying to local public colleges and planning to take accounting and other business courses that can be helpful in the real estate industry. She plans to keep living at home to save money.



Eighteen-year-old Nicholas Pinho, a senior at KIPP Academy Lynn, is weighing whether to attend a four-year college. He is also thinking about a trade program to become an electrician. Sophie Park for The New York Times

Brittney Date, an adviser at B.E.C.A. to students with disabilities, once talked with families mostly about their children reaching high school graduation. She now has much broader conversations with students and parents about skills, dreams and budgets.

“The focus has shifted to understanding what students want to do,” she said. “College? Cosmetology?”

At KIPP Academy Lynn, Nicholas Pinho, an 18-year-old senior, is also weighing whether a four-year college is worth it. He might go for a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering, but he is also thinking about a trade program to become an electrician.

Either way, he wants to stay nearby his Brazilian American family in Salem, Mass., he said, where he could work for his family’s kitchen installation business.

He was once interested in law school. But during the Covid-19 school closures, when he was chained to a laptop for remote learning, he had trouble focusing.

That experience, he said, made him realize “I like to do more hands-on work.”

**Dana Goldstein** covers education and families for The Times. More about Dana Goldstein

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