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It's time to change how we define success after graduation | Opinion

Josh Gordon Guest opinion

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Key Points

Deciding what to do after graduation is often framed around one of three options: enrollment in education or post-secondary training, enlistment in military service, or employment.

If the employment pathway is going to serve students and our community, it must evolve into a true career pathway.

Students need direction, momentum and a real pathway to a future with room to grow.

As graduation season approaches, we celebrate milestones such as diplomas, scholarships, awards and acceptance letters. These moments are meaningful, well-earned and worth recognizing. They also mark an important transition.

Before students leave high school, they are asked to decide what comes next. In Ohio, that decision is often framed around one of three options: enrollment in education or post-secondary training, enlistment in military service, or employment. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce refers to these as the “3 E’s,” a framework to help students choose a path forward.

This structure brings clarity to a complex decision. It also raises an important question about how we define success after graduation.

Enrollment in education or training is closely tied to long-term advancement. Military service offers structure, skill development and opportunity. The employment pathway, however, is less clearly defined. In many cases, it is understood simply as getting a job.

That definition falls short.

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A job can provide immediate income and meet short-term needs. It does not always provide stability, benefits or a path for advancement.

A career pathway offers something more. It connects early work experiences to skill development, credentials and advancement over time. It creates the conditions for wage growth, stability and upward mobility.

Analysis from Team NEO, a regional economic development organization, shows that many of the jobs driving growth in Northeast Ohio require education, training or credentials beyond entry-level work.

The data reinforces this distinction.

According to Policy Matters Ohio's *State of Working Ohio 2024* report, the typical worker in our state earns just under \$50,000 a year. Only recently have wages begun to catch up with rising costs such as housing, transportation, and health care.

Closer to home, a recent workforce study found that the largest share of employed Barberton residents works in retail, where median earnings are just over \$31,000 a year.

That is not a living wage in today's economy.

If the employment pathway is going to serve students and our community, it must evolve into a true career pathway. That includes access to specialized skill development, training connected to local employers, job placement opportunities and wraparound support services that help individuals persist and succeed.

There is important progress already happening in our schools and across our region.

In Barberton, students begin exploring career options as early as seventh grade through Paxton-Patterson career labs, engaging in hands-on experiences across

nearly two dozen career fields. At the high school level, the Four Cities Compact, a partnership between Barberton, Copley-Fairlawn, Norton and Wadsworth, provides access to 18 to 20 career pathways across the region.

Barberton High School plays a central role, hosting many of these programs, including advanced manufacturing with CNC machines and injection molding technology, engineering and design pathways, public safety training such as fire and EMT, and cybersecurity programs supported by a dedicated cyber range.

These opportunities expose students to real-world skills and in-demand industries. Our local school districts, including Barberton, are doing a tremendous job expanding access to career exploration and technical education.

But even with this progress, it is not enough. No school district can do this work alone.

Creating strong career pathways requires a coordinated effort across our region. Schools, employers, higher education and community organizations all have a role to play in helping students understand their options and connect early experiences to long-term opportunity.

The right question for today's graduates is not, "Will I get a job?" It is, "Will my first step put me on a path where my skills and earnings can grow over time?"

The goal is not for every student to have their future mapped out at 18. Most do not. The purpose of a pathway is to provide direction and momentum, with the understanding that plans can change.

But if we define the employment pathway only as getting a job, we risk limiting that momentum before it begins.

Graduation season is a time to celebrate achievement. It is also a time to consider what comes next, and how we, as a community, can ensure that every student leaves with more than a diploma, but also with direction, momentum, and a real pathway to a future with room to grow.

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