Dear [Name]:

One of my greatest challenges as superintendent of [district’s name] is the tension I experience between wanting to send more high school graduates to college and the reality that college is not always the best pathway for some of our students, at least not initially. Some of them are deterred by the tremendous economic barriers, and others prefer to work after graduating rather than continue schooling. How do I balance this tension and successfully prepare students for the range of experiences they will pursue after high school?

Here’s what I know. College is expensive, and the number one reason students drop out of college is costs.

Here’s what else I know. College graduates, on average, earned 56 percent more than high school graduates in 2015, and the income gap between college grads and everyone else has reached its widest point on record.

To address this tension, we began by acknowledging that many of our students need alternative paths to jobs and careers. The traditional path of college to career right out of high school is not for everyone, and even for those who go to college, most need at least a part-time job right away. In my district [insert matriculation data. For example, Marion County took an inventory of its high school graduates one year out and found about 20 percent were attending higher education, 20 percent were working in industry, and 60 percent were unemployed or underemployed.]

[We have been underdelivering for that 60 percent.] We haven’t done enough to connect the classroom to their futures. We haven’t done enough to expose them to in-demand career options and pathways. We had to change. Here in [enter district’s name], we have made the students in the middle our priority.

Here’s what we are doing. We are providing work-based learning, College Credit Plus, early exposure to career pathways and concrete ways to earn industry-recognized credentials. Inspired by Ohio’s SuccessBound initiative, we are connecting families, businesses and the community to create better options for our students and their futures. We are communicating with our constituents about the fact that an emphasis on gaining work experience and professional skills in high school does not discourage students from striving to get to college if that is what they want. In fact, it can improve their college experiences.

Prioritizing the middle, however, does not mean that we are ignoring the others. In fact, getting more skills into high schools benefits all students. It can alleviate the financial burden of college and mitigate the risk if students don’t make it through college. Take [insert name of student.] He knew he wanted to be a [doctor], and he knew he would struggle to finance his education. He signed up for his high school’s [phlebotomy] program knowing he would gain skills he could use to work his way through college.

In [enter district’s name], we are confronting our challenges head on and doing what we know is best for kids.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

[School or district name]