

Lack of Skills, Not Jobs, Holds Millions Back

By Bob Luddy and Scott Barron

Newly released test scores show that 37 percent of high-school seniors are prepared for college math and reading. This is just further proof of the country's failing school system.

The United States ranks 35th in the world in math testing scores, behind countries such as Russia and Vietnam. And reading? Based on one estimate, only 36 percent of American eighth-graders score at or above grade level. Among students from low-income backgrounds, roughly 80 percent score below grade level.

This is a big problem for job creators, who depend on an educated workforce to produce the goods and services necessary to succeed in today's competitive business environment. But with 1,500 students dropping out of school each day and millions more graduating each year with limited-to-no marketable skills, the lack of a skilled workforce has become one of the business community's biggest impediments to growth (ranking after overregulation, overtaxation and lack of access to credit).

Nowhere is the lack of qualified employees more evident than in the so-called "skills gap." There are 5.6 million job openings in the country that U.S. employers cannot fill, but there are also 3.3 million long-term unemployed Americans. This suggests that it's not a lack of available jobs holding the long-term unemployed back, but a lack of available skills.

Yet education reform to address the country's failing education system and the skills gap has barely been mentioned on the campaign trail. That shouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. Education policy shouldn't be a political issue. Policymakers should help students, not resort to partisan politicking. But in today's hyper-partisan environment, even education is political.

For example, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was created to provide low-income students in the District of Columbia with hope for a better future – and the money needed to realize it. Using scholarships of up to \$7,500, many underprivileged students were able to afford private school – giving them some of the same opportunities available to more

affluent families. The average household income of children who get these scholarships is less than \$21,000 a year.

Has the program worked? OSP has increased the graduation rate as much as 13 percent, providing families with limited means a brighter outlook. It's no wonder that OSP has more parental satisfaction than D.C. public schools.

But where does the program stand now? OSP is at risk of losing its federal funding (a projected \$150 million over five years). Opponents pursuing a partisan agenda have criticized the program for interfering with the public school system, urging Congress to scrap OSP altogether. Better, they argue, to direct those funds to traditional public schools. But throwing more money at the problem hasn't worked before. It won't work again.

Unfortunately, OSP is just one of many successful education reforms in the country under attack by those who look to sacrifice students for their own political gain. Similar reform, in New York City, Los Angeles and other big cities, faces a yearly battle for survival.

In an attempt to cut through the partisan rhetoric around education reform and come up with real solutions to help students, the Job Creators Network is launching its 100 Cubed Initiative. The campaign will address current education problems by engaging proven problem-solvers in academia and beyond – the goal being heightened public awareness at the local, state and national level of the crisis that is our public education system and the implications that entails.

This is not a political effort, but one focused on constructive criticism and change.

Every American student should have the opportunity to attend an excellent school. This is imperative to American economic growth and competitiveness.

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