

WORKFORCE NARRATIVE PROJECT

Education and Skills Development

Communications Consortium Media Center

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Prepared by the Communications Consortium Media Center

Americans believe that if you work hard, you should be able to care for yourself and your family and move up to fulfill your potential. That is the American promise. For most of the 20th century, a high school education was enough for a chance to advance into the middle class – to support your family, buy a home and send one's children to college.

Today, in our competitive and volatile global economy, much more is needed. People change jobs 12 times on average during their working lives. They need continuous access to education and skills development if they are to move into and stay in the middle class. Providing this access is an investment that is good for workers, their families, and our communities. It also gives businesses and America a competitive edge in the global economy.

America has the best workforce in the world – the most productive and the hardest-working, according to one survey after another. But today, American workers do not have the tools they need for a changing 21st century economy. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 45 percent of all job openings in the next ten years will require more than a high-school diploma and less than a four-year degree, but 75 million American have no post-secondary education.

This country is not making the investment necessary to change that alarming picture. Instead of rising, investment in the country's human capital has declined over the past 25 years. The United States, at the top of the world in terms of economic size, is now near the bottom of the industrialized world in terms of workforce investment. If we care about maintaining economic opportunity, we must make educational and skills development a national priority.

Business in the 21st century must be able to find workers with the new skills that are now necessary if they are to compete worldwide. Yet today, businesses are increasingly at a competitive disadvantage because they have difficulty in meeting their skill needs in a number of sectors and regions within the U.S. Business profitability and workers' wages will likely decline without sufficiently qualified workers. The downward spiral is avoidable. Investment in worker skill development will create a qualified labor force that can respond continuously to technology change and job restructuring and allow businesses to grow and innovate. Everyone wins

Of course, many businesses can pursue their interests with or without these supports through low road cost-minimizing strategies. But this is an outdated and counterproductive path. It is in the country's interest to encourage businesses to pursue profits through a strategy based on higher skills, productivity and earnings rather than

lower ones. In this way, the business interest and the national interest is brought into sync with one another.

Today's economy dictates that workers will need to diversify and adapt their skills throughout their lives. Greater resources for basic education and skills development are the first step, but more is required. In the past decade, we have learned a great deal about how best to improve the adult skills that lead to better jobs. The tools are there: adult education and training programs tailored to match the needs of employers and fill the gaps in workers' skills, and supports and services like child care and wage replacement to make the programs work. Government's role should be in stimulating innovation and leveraging other labor market actors to build economic ladders of success.

Ensuring that this generation of workers has the opportunity to acquire new skills is important for the next generation. Research has found consistent links between family income and children's achievement and success later in life. Parents with higher levels of education and financial resources are better able to provide the types of learning environments that facilitate their children's academic skills, and they are also able to be more responsive to their children's social and emotional needs. Adequately funding education and skills development programs can let workers move from minimum wage jobs into the middle class, where they in turn will be able to provide their children the necessary resources.

The United States cannot claim economic success when so many are left behind because we fail to provide access to the education and skills they need to succeed in the 21st century. What is lacking is political will. Investment in all workers up and down the income scale must be a national priority if America is going to deliver on its promise of work and to grow and compete in the global economy.