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INNOVATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Education and citizenship

The gap is growing between the skills possessed by youth who enter the work force after secondary school and those skills required by the knowledge-intensive manufacturing and service industries that are ascendant in the global economy.

Some of the income and employment losses for noncollege workers stem from declining employment in traditional manufacturing industries, which often paid high wages to even semiskilled workers. But the main explanation is the rising demand for highly skilled workers in all manufacturing and service industries. While the resulting wage inequality is bad news, the willingness of employers to pay an increased premium for skills represents an opportunity. If the nation can produce more well-trained workers with relevant skills, the market will pay a good return on the investment.

The skill gap inevitably calls attention to US public schools' poorly designed system for preparing noncollege youth for meaningful careers. Typically, secondary schools have close connections with colleges, but weak links with employers. After leaving secondary school, new workers usually rely on informal contracts to obtain full-time positions. Many test the labor market by bouncing from one employer to another before settling into long-term jobs. This creates a vicious cycle: the frequent movement of young workers discourages employers from providing training, while the absence of training limits the initiative of young people to remain with and work hard for a given firm.

Public policies have reinforced the growing tendency for academic skills to determine career success. Governments spend enormous amounts on grants and loans for low-income students to attend college. Far less is spent on vocational education or other effective post-secondary training. The natural impulse of policy makers in confronting job training has been to develop highly targeted programmes for poor and minority youth. Yet such a strategy can easily backfire. When programmes deal with only the most disadvantaged and least educated, their participants can become stigmatized.

An alternative strategy is at hand: a youth-apprenticeship option that combines classroom instruction with on-the-job training at a local business, starting in the late secondary school years. Similar apprenticeship systems have been operating effectively throughout Germany, Switzerland, and Austria for decades. Full-scale testing of American-style approaches to youth apprenticeship that likewise link school and work would require coordinated steps.

First, school curricula would need to be changed to expose students in early secondary school (the seventh through tenth grades) to information about various occupations, including visits to and short internships at work sites. Second, tenth-grade students could be offered a choice between pursuing a job apprenticeship or remaining in a purely academic programme. Those choosing the former option would sign formal contracts with specific employers. Third, a range of three-year apprenticeships that begin in the eleventh grade would be created. Students could earn skill certifications and academic credit as they combine workplace training with school courses. Fourth, apprentices would be given a comprehensive test at the end of the twelfth grade to ensure education and job proficiency. Finally, a combined work-and school-based curriculum could be developed that would involve spending increasing amounts of time at the work site. The third apprenticeship year (a new thirteenth grade) would involve material advanced enough to permit the apprentices to earn one year of credit toward a two-year college degree.

Job-based education and other school reforms would benefit the nation in several ways. Offering serious training and entry-level jobs to large numbers of

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noncollege youth would increase the supply of skilled workers. The opportunity to acquire marketable skills would be particularly important to minorities, who will make up a large part of new entrants to the work force. Since employers would be providing and paying for most of the training, they would have every incentive to impart the specific skills they expect to need. this would raise worker productivity and help firms introduce new technologies more efficiently. Many employers would build on the capacities of apprentices by developing new job ladders and providing additional career training. These steps, in turn, should create more professional careers for noncollege workers and thus raise their social status.

In addition, word of promising new career options and the chance to begin job training by eleventh grade would filter down to secondary school and middle school students. This could well achieve more improvement in academic skills than most school reforms currently under discussion by offering new incentives to learn, especially among those students not planning to attend college. Another important benefit for both society and job trainees would be the mentoring and acculturation that take place in an adult work environment.

A final and crucial advantage of the youth-apprenticeship strategy is its natural appeal to a broad public. Unlike programs targeted narrowly on the poor, this job-based education strategy is inclusive, not exclusive; it is productivity-enhancing, not simply redistributive; and it promotes incentives to learn and earn instead of discouraging work. Apprenticeship could become affirmative action of the best kind, helping young minority workers in a way that neither stigmatizes them nor gives them unfair advantages over other workers.

Youth apprenticeship is just getting under way in the United States. Wisconsin and Maine are planning to implement statewide programs. Enthusiasm runs high in those few places where apprenticeship projects are already operating. Young people in Pennsylvania's machine-tool youth apprenticeship system report that they are learning more in school and have broadened their horizons because of their participation in the program.

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Legislation proposed in Congress would provide federal grants for major youth-apprenticeship demonstration projects. Under the proposal communities would compete for federal funds on the basis of strong partnerships among local employers, schools, and labor. The proposal also calls for a National Youth Apprenticeship Institute, which would specify the academic and work skills necessary for a program to be qualified as an apprenticeship in a specific occupation, develop ways to certify apprentices and their business trainers, and monitor the quality of on-the-job training.

Existing federal vocational education funds can also be used to leverage movement toward youth apprenticeship and can push the expansion of apprenticeship opportunities in federal employment and in large federally funded programs. A solid apprenticeship training program for future federal employees in the secretarial and administrative assistant occupations could become a model for the private sector.

Although America has the finest system of higher education in the world, skyrocketing tuitions in the last decade have made college a difficult financial burden for all but the wealthiest families. The current federal student aid system is failing to assure universal access to higher education.