

US Needs New Educational Model for Economic Growth

Linking educators and employers is key to economic recovery and maintaining American global competitiveness

By [STAN LITOW](#)
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Stanley Litow is IBM's vice president of Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs and president of the IBM International Foundation

Although the latest U.S. employment numbers are trending positively, there remain deep and systemic issues that have made fuller economic recovery elusive. Chief among these is the disconnect between the availability of skilled workers and the tens of thousands of good jobs waiting to be filled. Our understandably intense focus on restoring full employment in the current down-cycle economy has led some to relegate education and education reform to the back burner. But we do so at our peril. The fact of the matter is that a redesigned and stronger educational system is essential to a sustainable economic recovery. We do ourselves—and future generations—a disservice if we fail to acknowledge this critical relationship.

Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education indicate a significant increase in high school completion rates. That would have been great news had it happened more than 40 years ago, when a high school diploma still was either a ticket to a middle-class lifestyle or meaningful preparation for postsecondary education. In 1970, nearly 75 percent of people with only a high school diploma were middle class. But that's ancient history in a world where the time between generations shrinks every year. In less than 10 years, fully two thirds of all middle-class jobs will require postsecondary education or training. Workers

with only a high school diploma—including the 75 percent of community college students who fail to complete their associate degrees—will have few opportunities to earn more than poverty wages.

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According to *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings* report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, the United States currently has 29 million middle-class jobs that require at least two years of postsecondary education or training, with an additional 14 million jobs coming online over the next 10 years. These current and future jobs span industries such as healthcare, information technology, business, professional services, and office and sales support. In addition, many of these jobs offer entry to lifetime careers, especially for the 30 percent of community college graduates who go on to complete their bachelor's degrees.

It is clear that education is firmly linked to economic growth. But simply funding education without reforming it is a mistake. To achieve education performance results that are meaningful in today's economy, we need to commit to both support and innovation. We need to retool our school systems to enable businesses, educators, and communities to collaborate on strategies that leverage diminishing resources to the greatest advantage for our young people.

Two initiatives that have the potential to maximize educational performance and create solid economic value are career and technical education (CTE) and a new approach to professional apprenticeships. Implementing these programs via deep collaborations across businesses and education systems at all levels could refocus billions of dollars of current funding on innovative solutions to the challenges facing our young people in the 21st century, and offer larger numbers of them a ticket to opportunity.

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Today's CTE programs replace what we used to call vocational education—now an outmoded model. Twenty-first century CTE programs must emphasize public-private partnerships between educators and employers, and ensure that school curricula are academically rigorous and economically relevant. Working together, educators and employers can structure course content and classroom experiences to create a seamless link between education and careers. One such partnership is the collaboration among the New York City Schools, The City University of New York, and IBM on New York's Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH), a grade 9-14 school that confers both the high school diploma and an associate degree in technology. Now entering its second year, P-TECH is achieving exciting results that are both replicable and scalable nationwide. The core concepts of this initiative are embodied in the U.S. Department of Education's Blueprint for Education Reform.

Adopting a new approach to professional apprenticeships enables us to link education to employment in another important way. In *Enterprising Pathways: Toward a National Plan of Action for Career and Technical Education* coauthors IBM and Opportunity Nation suggest repurposing Federal College Work-Study funds (currently about \$1 billion that provides on-campus wages for nearly 1 million college students) to help pay salaries for off-campus jobs that are directly connected to the students' academic majors and intended careers.

Replacing "cafeteria work" with meaningful professional apprenticeships with a built-in funding source, these new-model work-study jobs could be in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors. But these jobs must be designed to build skills, not just provide funds to pay tuition; they can and should do both. The distinguishing characteristics of these jobs would be the opportunities they would offer for college students to learn relevant skills to advance their learning and careers.

[\[See a collection of political cartoons on the economy.\]](#)

Working together to connect education to careers, educators and employers will help millions of our young people prepare for both higher education and meaningful lifelong employment. The United States has a distinguished history of adapting educational requirements to evolving market demands to maintain a competitive and stable economy. America enacted historic initiatives that increased mandatory education from eighth grade to high school, and later enabled broad access to higher education via the GI Bill. Both were education initiatives that fueled unprecedented economic growth. Just as we did in the past, it is now time for us to invest our efforts and resources in new educational models that will grow the skills of our young people and strengthen America's global competitiveness.