

[Home](#)[Magazine
Archive](#)[Magazine
Print](#)[eNewsletter](#)[eNewsletter
Archive](#)[eNewsletter
Subscription](#)[Reprints](#)[Media Kit](#)[Advertising
Guidelines](#)[Contact Us](#)

Date:3/30/2011

THE LATEST

Educational Investment: We Ignore it at our Own Risk

As the United States arises from the "Great Recession," state and national leaders must cast a glance toward next-generation industries, wherein job creation will prove critical. However, those we've elected foolishly seek to deplete funding directed toward education – a key to job creation and, in turn, economic growth. The National Skills Coalition has voiced these concerns and Andy Van Kleunen, the organization's executive director, proposes a viable strategy that other countries have adopted.

Recently, President Obama called for job-creating investments related to innovation and infrastructure, coupled with expansions in education. This would give more Americans the skills needed to fill new positions and, in turn, foster new industry growth. The National Skills Coalition commends the effort: Our nation's economic future demands a comprehensive strategy that links job creation and education investments – a strategy that international competitors have adopted but the United States has eschewed.



Gone should be the days when education policies don't match real-world relevance. Our future workers' employment prospects—and the competitive needs of American firms—must be met.

Obama's "winning for the future" call could have downsides if other policymakers take "the future" too literally. Obviously, Washington must be reminded that we suffer substantial unemployment and a skills deficit – and right now. While we can develop the next i-Pad, bullet train and even develop the latest cancer-related clinical trials, millions of today's U.S. workers don't possess the skills to fill open positions or even enroll in their first community college course.

The Future is “Now”

Employers want to hire right now, but they can't because of the current shortage of skilled workers. Federal policymakers cannot wait until the future to close that skills gap. So, it's hard to believe that some Congressional members call for an end to funding for workforce training programs.

Likewise, we hope that a renewed focus on innovation for the future doesn't inadvertently lead some policymakers *backward* to a re-adoption of old misperceptions about the range of skilled workers that will be needed to bring such innovations to market. In many states, local leaders are clear about where future jobs will be.

For instance, let's look at *New York's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs*, a new report released by the Skills2Compete-New York campaign and compiled by the New York City Department of Small Business Services and the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals. It predicts that middle-skill jobs will account for nearly one million job openings by the year 2018, representing some 40 percent of all job openings across the state. New York's findings mirror projections in other states including Indiana, New Mexico, Massachusetts and Maryland.

Middle-skill jobs—which require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree—account for the largest share of jobs not just in New York, but in most states across the country. This job category includes such well-paying professions as dental hygienists, aircraft mechanics and IT specialists. While these openings signal new opportunities for the workforce, the reality is that many people do not have the necessary skills to take on these new jobs. As such, the United States faces a critical middle-skill gap that could severely limit the nation's potential for full economic recovery.

Obama's “Sputnik Moment” Speech

President Obama has compared our current global economic position to the 1950s, when we responded to Russia's launch of Sputnik with investments in science and technology that, in turn, helped fuel decades of economic growth. The President's call for comparable investments in innovation and infrastructure is right on target. But if we are to take a lesson from that first “Sputnik moment,” we should consider the types of post-war education investments that accompanied those earlier down-payments on science and innovation.

Post-Sputnik economic growth didn't just happen because America set out to educate a nation of rocket scientists. True, support for scientists and engineers led to new technological breakthroughs that got us to the moon. But back on Earth, the impact of such breakthroughs required a more diverse team of skilled Americans. Post-war expansions in higher education, such as the G.I. Bill and federal student financial aid, did not send everyone to college to get a four-year or graduate degree at Stanford or MIT. More than two-thirds of G.I. Bill recipients received technical training toward a middle-skill credential encompassing some occupational training past high school, but not a university degree. As a result, while the first “Sputnik moment” may have led to the invention of the semi-conductor or the Internet, such innovations would not have impacted the U.S. economy unless there were millions of newly skilled workers who could translate those advances into the production of the personal computer, the re-cabling of our telecommunications landscape, or a myriad of other productive activities requiring skilled technical workers.

Such will be the case for 21st-century innovation-focused industries like high-tech manufacturing, clean energy, and biotechnology. If our education policies ignore the repeated demand by U.S. employers for more middle-skill workers within such industries, new technologies developed by our engineers and scientists will be put into production in overseas plants where competitor nations continue to out-train us. We'll ultimately import and consume the fruits of these American-developed innovations, but American workers won't be employed to produce them.

Coalition Response

The National Skills Coalition's Skills2Compete campaign has put forth a vision to lead us into new century: Every American should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school—leading to an advanced degree—to be pursued at whatever point and pace that makes sense for individual workers and industries. But that's not all. Every person must also have access to the basic skills needed to pursue such education.

This is attainable, but it requires a call-to-action by our nation's community and technical colleges, community-based training groups and labor-management training funds. Also, our nation's policymakers must invest in traditional college enrollment as well as expansion of apprenticeship and non-degree technical certificate programs that may ultimately find more people in higher paying jobs than those available to university graduates.

President Obama himself needs to take this seriously, too. His 2012 budget proposal calls for eight-percent reduction in federal support for workforce training. But far worse than that, members of Congress call for immediate elimination of all federal funding for workforce training. That's tantamount to waving the white flag in the skills race we've engaged with our international competitors.

Call to Action

Middle-skill workers keep our nation running. They'll form the backbone of America's economic future. They repair our roads and bridges, produce and transport our goods, staff our hospitals and nursing homes, and keep our communities safe. A ready supply of technically trained middle-skill workers ensures that industries will locate here rather than looking elsewhere.

Middle-skill workers are also the arms, legs and brains of our nation's future. Without them, we will not realize President Obama's next "Sputnik moment."

Businesses, unions, educators, and community leaders must call on the state and federal policymakers to rise to this call, to make sure that every American can be part of our nation's economic recovery.

Author Andy Van Kleunen is executive director of National Skills Coalition, a broad-based coalition of employers, unions, education and training providers, and public officials working toward a vision of an America that grows its economy by investing in its people so that every worker and every industry has the skills to compete and prosper.

All materials on this website are copyright protected and the property of [Positive Publications LLC](#)

For Permission reprinting or reproducing any materials please [Click Here](#).

Our Privacy Policy can be accessed [Here](#).

Copyright © Positive Publications LLC. 2011 Industry Today.