

Monday, January 30, 2012

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## Education

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## Obama Aims for a Skilled Workforce

President Obama tied his education agenda more closely with his economic agenda than ever before in his State of the Union address. His overarching goal to bolster the middle class depends on building a U.S.-based high-tech manufacturing industry in areas like energy, health, and telecommunications. The workforce skills needed for such an expansion explains his focus on job training, college enrollment, and high school graduation, [as I wrote last week](#). He hammered particularly hard on rising tuition rates, threatening to reduce government subsidies to universities that don't rein in costs. He called on Congress to stop student loan interest rates from doubling in July.

Higher education and training advocates were thrilled. "Students are already weighed down by state budget cuts, struggling family finances, and uncertain job prospects. We applaud President Obama for his proposal to keep student loan interest rates low," said Rich Williams, a higher education advocate for US PIRG. National Skills Coalition Executive Director Andy Van Kleunen said Obama was listening to "Main Street" when he proposed to train 2 million workers. "Countless industry surveys document the skills gap, particularly for middle-skill jobs that require technical training, not necessarily a four-year degree. ...Their demand for workforce training is at an all-time high."

The difference between this year's speech and last year's speech is striking. Last year, it was a more traditional conversation about education. This year, it was about jobs. Last year, Obama spent a large chunk of time plugging the Education Department's Race to the Top competitive grant program, arguing that it should be the model for reauthorizing No Child Left Behind. This year, they did not get a mention. His most substantive comments about elementary and secondary education involved teacher training and evaluations. He didn't even bring up the state waiver program for No Child Left Behind.

Was Obama's focus on workforce skills appropriate, given the problems lawmakers are facing in reauthorizing No Child Left Behind? What is the role of higher education in helping create a skilled workforce? What is the role of K-12 education? Do educators spend enough time talking about workforce training? Did the president ignore elementary education to his peril? Does his economic spin on education help advance more traditional K-12 school improvement efforts like assessments or turnaround activities?

-- Fawn Johnson, [NationalJournal.com](#)