



## Focus on Middle School to Address Impending Workforce-Skills Gap

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One of the greatest challenges facing Los Angeles and urban regions across the county is ensuring that businesses and employers will have the quality workforce they need for the jobs of the 21st century. Economic, demographic and educational trends are on a collision course that could bode ill for our future economy unless we address them today, and policy makers should start by giving high priority to middle school reforms.

Economic restructuring and globalization have fundamentally altered how firms work and locate and the employment opportunities that are available to city residents. Demand for highly-educated, highly-skilled workers in the state is projected grow significantly over the next two decades to meet the needs of a high-tech and high-end service economy.<sup>1</sup> Outsourcing will extend well beyond manufacturing to all kinds of service jobs; the jobs that will remain in the U.S. will require a creative, flexible, personal-service-oriented workforce of lifelong learners.<sup>2</sup>

Along with these economic shifts, the demographic makeup of the U.S. is changing, with the impending retirement of the highly-educated, highly-skilled “baby boomers” and more diverse youth population. For many parts of the country, the retirement of the baby boomers represents a severe risk to their local economies; in Los Angeles and other parts of California, we fortunately have a relatively young population. In Los Angeles County, there are approximately 800,000 workers who will reach retirement age within the next decade, but there are currently 3 million residents between the ages of 18-39 and another 760,000 who will reach age 18 within 10 years.

The problem, of course, is that even where we have a natural advantage of a young population, the educational system is not adequately preparing students with both the soft and hard skills they need. The U.S. is falling behind many other industrialized nations in student achievement: as Bill Gates

famously remarked, “when I compare our high schools to what I see when I’m traveling abroad, I am terrified for our work force of tomorrow.”

The response of federal policy has largely been to increase educational testing and accountability; but as Princeton Economist and former Vice Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank Alan Blinder argues, schools will not build “the workforce we will need in the future by drilling kids incessantly with rote preparation for standardized tests in the vain hope that they will perform as well as memory chips.”<sup>3</sup>

We clearly need to reform the educational system to improve achievement but also to prepare young people for the jobs of the future, and middle schools are the perfect place to focus these efforts for two reasons. First, how students do in middle school both academically and socially has great bearing on whether they will stay in school and be successful later in life.<sup>4</sup> Second, there has been a lot of attention to reforms in early and primary education (e.g. universal preschool, early reading) and high schools (e.g. smaller learning communities and school-to-career movements), but precious little with regard to middle schools. Here are a few ideas for ensuring that middle schools provide the educational support necessary for students to move on successfully to high school.

- ★ **Look to extend academic reforms that are having promise in high schools to middle schools and strengthen relationships between middle and high school systems.**

Small learning communities provide more personalized learning environments that can provide the attention and relevant curriculum that will keep middle school students engaged. Coming from smaller elementary schools, sixth graders in large middle schools can easily get lost academically and engage in risky behavior.<sup>5</sup>

Applied, project-based learning in these environments can build the interpersonal and team-building skills so important for the jobs of the 21st century.

★ **Work in partnership with community-based organizations**

In the effort to improve student achievement scores at all costs, schools have slashed many extra-curricular activities and are more closed than ever to working with community organizations. After school and other community programs provide tutoring, supplemental services for families, mentors, and leadership opportunities for young people, all of which are critical to helping middle school students transition to high school with the aspirations to graduate and pursue postsecondary opportunities.<sup>6</sup> School administrators and teachers should work in partnership, not competition, with these groups for the good of students. They could begin with opening up school space for after school programs and activities, and organizing regular meetings and information sharing between teachers and community organization staff.

★ **Broad campaign to make middle schoolers aware of postsecondary options**

With the majority of dropouts happening between 9th and 10th grades, efforts to inform students during high school about why they should stay in school may be too late. Schools, in partnership with community organizations, should incorporate informational campaigns and workshops for middle school students and their families about the courses and preparation they will need to successfully graduate from high school prepared for college and the workforce of today. Universities, community colleges, and employers should be engaged to talk to students about opportunities and what they will need to reach them. Employers are already asking for this type of involvement,<sup>7</sup> it is up to school administrators and policy makers to make it happen.

Focusing these kinds of reform efforts on middle school will reap benefits not only for students; ultimately it will benefit society with a more prepared workforce our economy will need over coming decades.

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Hanak and Mark Baldassare, California 2025: Taking on the Future, Public Policy Institute of California, July 2005, <http://www.ppic.org>; California Business Roundtable and Campaign for College Opportunity, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Alan S. Blinder, "Outsourcing: Bigger Than You Thought," The American Prospect, November 2006, <http://www.prospect.org>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Tamera Murdock, et al., "Middle-Grade Predictors of Students' Motivation and Behavior in High School," Journal of Adolescent Research, Vol.15 No. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Akos, "Extracurricular Participation and the Transition to Middle School," Research in Middle Level Education, Vol. 29, No. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Jim Ridings, director of staffing for Parsons Corp., a Pasadena-based engineering firm said, "Soon we'll all be in the education business. We've got to start at the 6th or 7th grade level. They are just not creating enough engineers." In Lisa Girion, "A year of rapid job growth for Southland" Los Angeles Times, March 3, 2007