

POLITICO

Enterprising paths for new economy

By JOHN BRIDGELAND and MELODY C. BARNES | 03/05/13 09:30 PM EST

When it comes to preparing the next generation for good careers, schools and communities across the country are leading the way. Our nation faces a jobs crisis, talent gap and dropout epidemic — big challenges, compounded by the pressure of hard fiscal times. These problems are not insurmountable but necessitate public policies with far more problem-solving punch than those being deployed today. A re-envisioned career and technical education system — or “enterprising pathways” — is one example that would connect high school to post-secondary education and eventually to a career, creating opportunities for all students.

A generation ago, most jobs required a high school diploma or less. By the end of this decade, two-thirds of America’s jobs will require some post-secondary training. Today’s education system is not keeping up with the demands of tomorrow’s workforce — only 78 percent of our students graduate from high school on time and fewer than 40 percent of 25-to-34-year-olds have some post-secondary degree. We’re already seeing the effects of the emerging gap — many states with high unemployment also report thousands of available jobs.

Higher education must be an accessible and affordable option for all, but four-year degrees cannot be the only pathway that leads to middle-class careers and family-sustaining wages. There are currently 29 million jobs in the United States — nearly half of all jobs that pay middle-class wages — that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor’s degree. Our economy depends on the strength of our workforce and that means we need better training to meet the demand for registered nurses, lab technicians, middle managers and electricians.

For too many students, the soaring costs of college have put a post-secondary education out of reach. One- and two-year degree programs can offer lower-cost alternatives, while preparing students for high-quality, well-paying jobs. In some cases, students participating in career and technical education programs can earn college credits and credentials while still in high school. Students at Pathways in Technology Early College

High School in New York City have an opportunity to earn their high school diploma and an associate's degree with value in the labor market. IBM incorporates workplace skills in the curriculum, provides a mentor for every student and guarantees that those who graduate with an associate's degree are first in line for jobs at IBM; a partnership that benefits the students and business community.

Eighteen- and 19-year-olds in Michigan are also experiencing success through innovative programs. Students are graduating from Henry Ford Early College High School with a one- or two-year college credential with currency in the labor market and exposure to local employers. Unlike the biased tracking systems of the past, these are portable, stackable credentials, enabling students to immediately seek employment or use their associate's degree as a steppingstone to continue their education.