by David Rattray and Chris Mead

In the pursuit of prosperity for all, post-secondary education attainment means more than just better-paying jobs. In today’s economy, it could determine whether you even have a job. With so much at stake, the business community must partner with other key stakeholders to play a critical role in advocating for changes that actually prepare high school graduates for college and career.

America’s education system is our country’s operating system, and it needs to be constantly upgraded to meet the demands of our rapidly evolving world. Such a platform is critical to ensure economic growth, broadly shared prosperity, and innovation for the future.

Currently, however, there is an incredible mismatch—and a growing gap—between what students are learning in school and what they will need on the job.
Even now, in the midst of historic unemployment levels, 3.9 million jobs remain unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants.

In today’s economy, being prepared for a career means having at least some post-high school education. It is reported that by 2020, 65 percent of U.S. jobs—almost two-thirds—will require some form of postsecondary education. Study after study shows other nations making necessary changes in their education systems to ensure that they capture their share of future opportunities. Acknowledging some regional exceptions, the United States is not.

The business community has long recognized the importance of preparing students for the demands of the job market, but the seismic shifts technology has brought to every industry requires different qualities, knowledge, and competencies to be prepared for the 21st century workforce. Business leaders need employees who are innovative, analytical, and emotionally intelligent while also demonstrating the ability to apply skills and knowledge to solve complex problems.

The measurement of deeper learning through the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and next generation assessments will help prepare a globally competitive future workforce and economic prosperity for all. With a concerted effort, employers can support institutions and students as they transition to these new standards and assessments.

In the states where they are implemented with care and support, the Common Core State Standards will help many more students solve problems, think critically, collaborate, communicate and, above all, master core academic content. Cultivating these aspects of an “academic mindset” creates benefits beyond the classroom by helping ensure that we strengthen the preparation pipeline prospects for both workforce and college.

Research has shown that when students are required to apply knowledge, their understanding and retention are dramatically deeper. Upgrading our education system to develop and test for deeper learning skills will develop a strong workforce critical to our economic competitiveness.

In some areas of the country, there is hesitancy to uncover weakness in the education system and/or poor student performance. The next generation of assessments built around the new standards will provide more accurate information to teachers and parents about where students are excelling and where they need more development. The evaluation process built into the new standards will allow schools to face and deal with academic shortfalls by identifying where they exist. That comparative data may seem threatening to some, but it is also necessary because the Common Core State Standards are tied to real world requirements of the workplace and higher education institutions. Without having the requisite knowledge and skills, the chance for either college or workplace success is reduced.

The sad reality is that the United States has failed to provide high-quality educational opportunities to many students, particularly minorities and underserved populations. Given the reality of demographic trends, we won’t be able to meet workforce and community needs without improving equitable access to education attainment. The Common Core State Standards can make it more likely that these large segments of the population will have the deeper learning skills they need to succeed in both college and in the workforce.

In addition to securing employment, education has a very significant impact on income and career stability: the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the average American with a college degree earns nearly three times more than a high school dropout. With nearly two-thirds of our economy driven by consumer spending, a rise in education attainment levels will boost purchasing power to the benefit of the entire economy.

A regional or state economy with proven, independent verification of future employee skill levels will be more appealing to employers looking for places to invest. And, specific industries are inevitably drawn to communities with specialized expertise—the kinds of applicable knowledge recommended under the Common Core State Standards.

Some opposition groups insist that the new standards constitute an overreach by federal policymakers intent on establishing control over state education policy. However, the Common Core are standards, not a curriculum. They provide a common way for states to evaluate success.
that we were all on this journey together. And as an aspiring teacher I was particularly in awe because as we probed and searched and actually had many of the students sitting up and engaged, Mr. Bane could usually connect the discussions back to the themes in the books and stories we were reading. Then a little gleam would appear in his eyes that I imagined was saying, “Got you! Yes, we are still in an American lit class and you were actually enjoying it.”

Sadly for the Minneapolis school system, Mr. Bane only lasted five or six more years in the classroom. Was it teacher burnout? I don’t know. In his search for deeper meaning, he journeyed to the Southwest where he immersed himself in the culture of one of the Native American tribes living in the area. But on the way he had enriched the lives of thousands of students. There wasn’t yet a name like deeper learning for what he was doing. It was just great teaching. And now that we do have a name (and even expanded the definition to reflect the 21st century skills that were just emerging back in my high school days), it’s perhaps become something easier for us to aspire to as we take our students—and ourselves—on the learning journey. —DK

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and identify areas that require attention, not prescriptive rules about how to fund or teach. And, they offer the operational upgrade of applied knowledge, which has been notably absent from K-12 education in America.

Businesses are more than simply demanding customers of an education system. Employers recognize that their community and business success will rest, in large part, on the capacity of the next generation to compete in a global economy. Seeking and nurturing meaningful partnerships between the business community and education stakeholders just makes sense.

If employers come together as they’ve done recently in Dayton, Ohio, where they are working with school officials to create a STEM high school, the importance of applied learning can be demonstrated and the community can position itself for new business investment.

When the drive for education quality arises simultaneously from chambers of commerce and educators, as it has in Knoxville, Nashville, and other Tennessee cities, creative solutions to long-standing challenges are identified and tackled. Mentoring programs, new progress evaluation tools, and other approaches are yielding results in relatively short timespans.

Philanthropic, business, and educator interests have come together in Omaha, Kalamazoo and other communities, resulting in reduced drop-out rates and increased college ambitions for high school students.

Nationally unique approaches to troubled urban schools in Milwaukee, an increased focus on potential Hispanic applicants to college in Los Angeles, and many other case studies around the country prove that employer and educator goals are not in conflict.

To education policymakers, we ask that you make sure the business community is at the table as you develop college- and career-ready standards or devise new ways students can demonstrate they are ready for the next phase of their education and the workplace.

To the business community, we urge that you get involved in education in meaningful ways—at the local level, for example, by creating internships, work-study opportunities, or other ways that give students real-world educational experiences; and at the state level, make sure policymakers and the public know that the business community supports efforts to bring deeper learning standards and instruction to all students.

Together, we can help ensure students have the deeper learning skills they need to succeed in their careers and enhance our country’s economic competitiveness and future prosperity.

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