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perspective

## Colorado Voices: A different path to prosperity

By Michael P. Mazenko

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After the recent cold snap - as my neighbor's pipes froze and my furnace shorted out - I was reminded of just how little we appreciate and how much we undervalue skilled labor in this country. When the plumber told my neighbor he was booked until 2 a.m., and when the pipe repair exceeded \$300, I wondered why schools keep pushing the college-for-all mentality. The education system should promote the trades and skilled labor as much as it does academics and bachelor's degrees, and education at all levels should become more experiential and skill-based.

This conclusion is supported by the recently released Harvard study that concluded not all kids should go to college - or at least not a four-year university in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. The aptly titled report "Pathways to Prosperity" recommends a new direction for education reform, based on the practical needs of students and the economy. Sadly, too many education leaders don't share this view.

Politicians and education reformers never talk about producing more plumbers or IT technicians or dental hygienists or physical therapists, just more scientists and engineers. President Obama and Bill Gates preach incessantly about the need for the United States to produce degree holders to keep up with the technological demands of a global economy. And that is certainly a noble and necessary goal. Yet, for every engineer we produce, we need hundreds, if not thousands, of skilled technicians to manufacture and repair the innovations those engineers create. Clearly, current education reform based almost entirely on standardized test scores and college degrees is the wrong direction for Colorado and for the United States.

Of the millions of jobs that will be created in the next decade, 30 percent of them will not require a bachelor's degree. Many positions such as paralegals, health care technicians, and tech support workers need only certificates and associate degrees. Only 28 percent of Americans have a bachelor degree, and many of them are looking for work.

In a study of Florida college graduates, the earnings discrepancy between two-year programs and bachelor degrees is a revelation. Five years out of school, the average trade school or community college graduate makes \$47,000 per year compared to bachelor degree holders who average \$36,000. School administrators, counselors, and education reformers are being disingenuous if they fail to promote this information to students and parents. By not offering advice on students'

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realistic prospects for college degrees and marketable skills, schools are setting up too many kids for failure.

Europe outpaces the U.S. in this area, another key point of the Harvard study. Education critics regularly tout the performance of Finland in international test scores, but they do little to promote the Finnish system. As many as 70 percent of Finnish students enter career training after their sophomore year of high school. Elementary schools in Finland teach skills such as carpentry alongside the multiplication tables. And Finnish students only take one standardized test in their school career — it's at the end of high school to determine university qualification. Yet, despite emphasizing skill-based education, Finland remains on the cutting edge in technology and is home to five of the world's top global technology corporations.

Colorado needs to design educational standards and goals that move beyond basic academic skills learned at desks and measured by standardized tests. For every new magnet or charter school like the Denver School of Science and Technology, Colorado districts need to offer technical education like that found at Hamilton Career Technical Center near Cincinnati, Ohio. Hamilton is winning praise for its record of producing skilled health care technicians, electricians, and mechanics, and offering viable careers to non-academic students.

"Pathways to Prosperity" should be required reading for every education reformer in Colorado, especially members of the legislature

and education committees. If Colorado truly hopes to create a productive education system, we must commit to redesigning our education system to produce both higher-level degrees and productive skilled labor.

Hopefully, reformers like Sen. Michael Johnston will move beyond his focus on basic skills and college attendance and begin drafting his next bill promoting practical education reforms based on building marketable skills at all levels.

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