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Education isn't the only solution for jobs

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Is education overrated?

You certainly don't hear anyone asking that this time of year, as millions of students have started classes again. Instead, catchphrases about how "education is the answer" - to our nation's and individuals' economic futures - are ringing out like school bells.

Yes, education is important. It's vital, in fact. But it's only part of the story. Too often we act as if education is the silver-bullet solution to all economic and social ills. Yet while we wait, decade after decade, for substantive school reform, education is being used by some as an excuse for inaction on a host of economic issues.

For example, what are we doing today to preserve the kinds of jobs we tell students will be there for them once they graduate? What are we doing today to preserve the ladder of success?

Not much.

During the last four years, at least 3 million U.S. jobs have been moved offshore, and over the next decade another 10 percent to 15 percent of today's 134 million jobs will be lost to foreign operations.

And the jobs flowing to countries such as China and India are not just low-paying manufacturing jobs. This year alone, 830,000 high-quality service and information technology jobs will be lost offshore.

It is increasingly clear that the much-touted tradeoff around globalization - cheaper consumer products here at home in exchange for higher corporate profits from offshore operations - isn't an equitable deal. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. jobs that are expected to grow the most this decade include food service providers, waiters and waitresses, retail salespersons, cashiers, janitors and cleaners. Think of our future as a "Wal-Mart nation" of low-paid workers buying foreign products and foreign services that American plants and workers used to provide.

How many parents or business leaders are telling students the real story as they head off to school?

Americans, especially business leaders, like to say that the U.S. is the embodiment of meritocracy, where everyone is judged on their individual abilities and can climb the ladder of success and reward. But salaries in the U.S. are more unequal now than at any time since 1927, and the extreme wealth of the mega-rich rivals that of the Gilded Age. Today, the top one-fifth in household income earn more than the middle three-fifths combined. And because of the vagaries of a skewed tax code, very few Americans are benefiting from the higher corporate profits being generated by offshoring.

None of this is to say that education at all levels isn't important. It is critically important. Skills matter, and a college education continues to provide a substantial earnings advantage. We must be dead serious about reforming our schools, paying fairly for and retaining good teachers, building safe and modern school facilities, and helping students achieve high standards.

And we must continue to explain to students that learning is the key to paving rewarding career paths. But education will not fulfill its promise if quality jobs aren't there at the end of these paths. And we'll be further renegeing on our "contracts" with students if workers don't share more fairly in the rewards from their increased productivity and the profits they produce.

Let's renew our commitment to investing in education. But let's also take action to preserve good jobs, and make sure that the jobs left over after globalization pay enough and have sufficient basic benefits for families to support themselves.

Our assignment now is to do our homework and, with high standards of stewardship, pass the test of ensuring responsible jobs and equitable incomes. If we fail, it will be a grave disservice to our young people and to our

nation's economic future - no matter how much time students spend in the classroom.

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