# Reform required to get nation off fast-food employment track

*by Marc H. Morial*

An independent commission on education I serve on recently concluded that the U.S. educational system needs a major overhaul by 2021 to properly equip future workers to cope with a rapidly globalizing marketplace.

In the report entitled "Tough Choices or Tough Times," the so-called New Commission on Skills in the Workplace proposes cutting high school short at 10th grade for qualified students, investing the savings into increasing teachers' salaries and creating more preschool programs, among other reforms.

"The first commission, in 1990, never dreamed that we would end up competing with countries that could offer large numbers of highly educated workers willing to work for low wages. American workers must match their education levels - a big challenge - but our workers' wages will still fall unless we can offer something else, and that is a capacity for endless creativity and innovation," noted Charles Knapp, chairman of the bipartisan panel made up of former cabinet secretaries, governors, college presidents as well as business, civic and labor leaders.

You've heard of the recent "Fast Food Nation" movie. If our nation doesn't do anything, future generations of Americans might be relegated to a life of flipping burgers than designing semiconductors or running their own businesses. We can pretty much kiss our current standard of living goodbye in 50 years if we don't act now.

The United States now accounts for 14 percent of the world's college students, less than half the share it had in the 1970s. Our nation is one of the world's top spenders on elementary and secondary education yet we continue to produce mediocre students compared to other industrialized countries.

Over the past 30 years or so, total expenditures for pre-college education nationwide have nearly doubled - from $212 billion (in current dollars) in 1970 to $511.2 billion in 2004, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Statistical Abstract for 2007. Even so, our students lag behind in mathematical and scientific skills - ranking 16th and 13th, respectively, in 2003, among students in the world's most developed countries.

Minorities in the United States are at an even greater disadvantage than whites. According to the latest National Assessment for Educational Progress - otherwise known as the nation's report card, the gap between percentage of white and black fourth graders proficient in math and reading actually grew despite implementation of the ambitious No Child Left Behind education law whose ultimate goal is to narrow the divide by 2014. Furthermore, according to 2003 Census Bureau statistics, black children were also substantially less likely to have access to a computer at home - 47 percent compared to 79 percent - a tool they'll definitely need to master to succeed in the future.

Back in the 1950s, jobs didn't require the kind of education they do now. In 1957, 2.9 percent of blacks 25 years old and over held college degrees, compared to 7.6 percent of all Americans. By 2005, 17.5 percent had graduated from at least an undergraduate institution, compared to 27.6 percent nationwide. And on average, black college graduates made an average of $20,000 a year more than those with just high school diplomas.

Now more than ever a higher level of education is required to produce the innovation needed to keep the nation competitive worldwide as well as help minorities in the United States achieve economic parity with white Americans.

Occupations in the fields of computer science and math and in architecture and engineering drew the highest weekly average wages with $1,132 and $1,105, respectively, in 2005. Blacks, however, only made up at most 7 percent of the work force in these fields.

The lowest-paying jobs were in fields that do not require advanced education - food preparation and related services ($356 per week), followed by farming and fishing ($372) and building and grounds maintenance ($394). In 2005, blacks made up 11.2 percent of the food service industry. That percentage increased to 23.6 percent for non-restaurant food servers, many of whom don't make tips but low hourly wages.

Since the mid-1970s, education has definitely improved for blacks. High school dropout rates have declined at a rate nearly six times that of whites - from 27.3 percent to 15.1 percent from 1975 to 2004. Unemployment rates of blacks with high school diplomas have also fallen at nearly eight times the rate of whites - from 26.1 percent to 18.3 percent from 1980 to 2005.

Our community has also made great progress in terms of enrollment in institutions of higher education at the undergraduate, graduate and professional levels - nearly doubling from 1.2 million to 2.164 million. However, as concluded in a September study, blacks are less likely to leave college with degrees than other minority groups.

Yet, amid some of this less-than-encouraging news, there is a bright spot on the horizon when it comes to early childhood education, which the commission's report highlighted as a way to producing children with the skills needed to compete against the world.

Over the past 25 years, the youngest of black children have made promising progress in closing the gap between them and white youngsters not only in terms of enrollment in these programs but also performance with respect to basic skills.

An increasing and higher percentage of blacks attended preschool programs - 67.0 percent compared to 63.0 percent of whites in 2004. Back in 1980, the tables were reversed - 34.9 percent versus 37.8 percent.

Of black children not enrolled in kindergarten and between the ages of 3 and 5 in 2005, 24 percent could recognize letters, compared to 29 percent of whites, and 61 percent could write their own name, 1 percentage point better than white children. It's a major improvement from 1993 when 18 percent of black youngsters could identify letters and 45 percent decipher their name.

Young blacks are also more likely than their white counterparts to count to 20 or higher - 69 percent compared to 65 percent. But they are still less likely to read or pretend to read storybooks - 67 percent compared to 75 percent - and to possess three to four skills - 44 percent compared to 47 percent. Yet, even when they lagged behind white children, they still made progress.

This bodes well not only for our nation's future but the black community. If our educational system can keep these students engaged and excited about learning as they progress through school over the next decade, there is some hope that we'll be able to produce future generations of workers capable of competing on the world stage.

We're already losing our edge in the international marketplace. The longer we wait the quicker this already tenuous grip will slip. We need proactive effective educational reform now not later. It's time to finally enact effective legislation that truly ensures that our nation is not left behind in the quest for a piece of the international economic pie.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Â© Copley News Service

*Reform required to get nation off fast-food employment track by Marc H. Morial*