

Improving test scores barely pass grade in business

by Michael_Kinsman

Good news is surfacing on the future of the American labor force.

The national average ACT composite test score increased this year for the third time in the past five years and the percentage of high school graduates ready for college-level course work continued to grow as well.

The Iowa testing company said scores for graduating high school students improved on all four required subjects - English, mathematics, reading and science.

"These upward trends show more students are graduating from high school with the academic skills they need to succeed in college and work-force training programs," says Richard Ferguson, ACT chairman and chief executive. "We still have a long way to go in ensuring that all high school graduates are prepared for the next level, but the progress we're seeing is very encouraging. Changes in academic achievement generally take time to develop."

Ferguson couldn't be more accurate in his assessment.

It seems that schools are making headway into providing better educations in the basic skills. This will eventually show up in the work force in the form of better workers.

But high school preparation is only part of the workplace equation. Some students will continue their studies in college, but many will jump into the labor force today.

That's where we have a rub.

U.S. companies too often want turnkey employees, or those who can walk in and start in on their jobs today.

Unfortunately, that's increasingly difficult in a world where most jobs require more technical skills than ever before.

The federal government reports that two-thirds of the U.S. economic growth in the 1990s was due to new technologies. It also says that today 60 percent of jobs require technical skills held by just 31 percent of workers.

This is particularly troublesome at lower levels of companies. If a new employee just barely passes muster to get hired, it becomes difficult for them to attain the on-the-job skill training they need to succeed and become more valuable to their employers.

A better educated work force should always be our goal. Improving the education of high school students to make them better qualified for college and technical skill training is essential.

But it doesn't stop there. Every employer needs to take to heart its responsibility to provide training funds and programs that push these workers to continually increase their job skills.

It's in their financial interest and one of their most pressing responsibilities.

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