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We're missing the boat

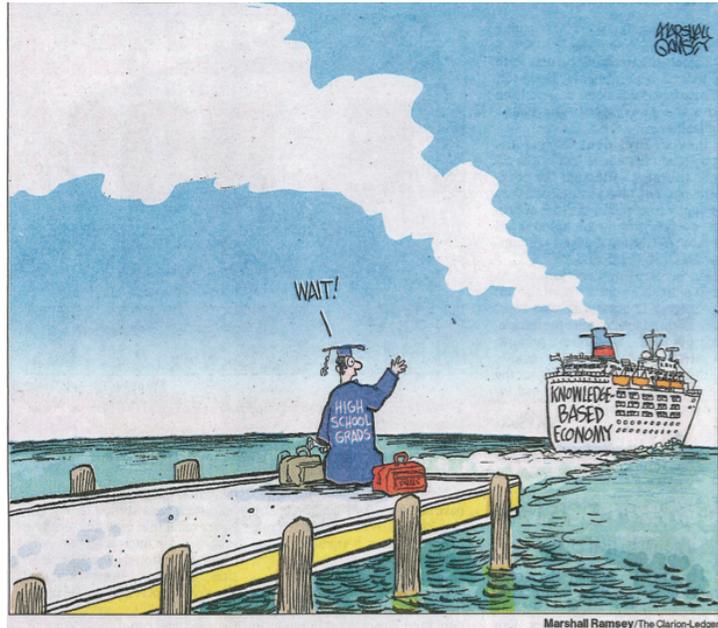
By Former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove
Clarion-Ledger Guest Columnist

Our nation is in the grip of a crisis that is destroying our nation's resources, killing job opportunity, and threatening future prosperity. It brings repercussions that we may not yet fully understand but will feel for decades to come. And, tragically, it might have been prevented with foresight and determination.

No, I am not referring to the BP oil spill or the continuing economic recession. As devastating as these events have been, another catastrophe is more insidious—a long-term threat that lurks beneath our national consciousness. It is our failure to prepare our young people for the challenges of a fast-changing, knowledge-based global economy.

We who live in the Gulf Coast states are famous for our resilience. We weathered Katrina, and we will weather the oil spill. But we will need much more than booms and sandbags, hammers and dredges, to restore our economic health.

Even as we work to solve our immediate economic and environmental problems, we must renew our long-term focus on education, and our commitment to make sure our young people are prepared for the workplace and college. It is that commitment, above all, that will be the catalyst for lasting recovery.



For decades, our nation has focused on lowering the high school dropout rate—which, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, has declined over the past 30 years but is still unacceptably high, especially in low-income rural and urban areas.

But what about those students who do graduate from high school? Do they have the necessary skills to succeed in job training or college? Do they have the tools to adapt to a shifting economic landscape? Do we even know what the educational foundation and those tools should be?

The statistics are not encouraging. A 2007 study by ACT of graduates at 400 high schools nationwide found that only 25 percent of those who took standard college-prep courses

were prepared for their first year of college. The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2004 that more than 40 percent of public community college students—and 20 to 30 percent of public university students—needed remedial courses. The cost to students and families is great, in both money spent on these noncredit courses and additional time required to earn a degree. And most troubling is the fact that students who need remedial courses in college at the start are the least likely to finish.

The news on the employment front is no better. Achieve, Inc., in a 2005 survey of employers estimated that 39 percent of recent high school graduates were unprepared for entry-level jobs—and 45 percent were not prepared to advance beyond those positions.

According to widely cited projections by the labor economists Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, the slowing growth in the number of workers with some education or training beyond high school will result in a shortage of 14 million skilled workers by 2020.

We needn't wait that long to understand the direct correlation between education and employment opportunities. Traditionally, a high school diploma was the primary target of education – a sufficient prerequisite for getting a job that could sustain not only an individual but also an entire family. Today, this is rarely the case.

There is a widening gap between the earnings of high school graduates and those with postsecondary education and training.

As Carnevale states in his latest study for Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, “Post-secondary education or training has become the threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings in good times and bad.”

He's right. Consider this statistic in the May 2010 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report: the current unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma is 15 percent, compared to 4.7 percent for those with a college degree.

As our economy becomes increasingly technology driven, an ill-prepared high school graduate is woefully disadvantaged. Workers no longer act in isolation or follow specific technical instructions; the modern technology-based workplace requires workers who are able to act collaboratively and make independent decisions.

Many U.S. businesses end up taking up the slack – losing productivity and profit as they divert resources to training new workers in the knowledge and skills needed for entry-level jobs.

It's time for more immediate answers. And I'm convinced we cannot find them by simply rehashing tired solutions or redoubling conventional efforts that produce only modest and unsustainable results.

We need to build reforms on solid evidence of what our high school students know—and what they need to know to succeed in even the toughest economy.

Specifically, we have to determine the critical link between the high school academic experience and preparation for postsecondary education and training. We need to know whether 12th graders have the knowledge and skills for college-level academics and high-skill careers. And we need a reliable indicator to tell us, because one does not now exist.

To fill that gap, the National Assessment Governing Board, an independent bipartisan body that sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), is redesigning the NAEP 12th grade reading and mathematics tests to serve as this crucial indicator, a measure of seniors' preparedness in reading and mathematics for college and job training. NAEP, also known as the Nation's Report Card, is uniquely positioned to fill this role: It is the only source of nationally representative data on 12th grade student achievement.

As a part of the assessment redesign, the Governing Board is sponsoring 17 research projects that, among other things, aim to determine how the NAEP 12th grade reading and mathematics tests align with the skills and knowledge used for decisions about placement into college and job training programs.

These studies will help clarify what students need to know and be able to do to qualify for credit-bearing courses or job training programs. Remarkably, no consensus on such a definition of preparedness currently exists.

In connection with this research, the Governing Board established the NAEP High School Achievement Commission. My goal, and that of my colleagues on the Commission, is to clearly and effectively communicate this vital information to the public, policy makers, educators, and employers who may want to use it to shape policy and improve practices in education and workforce training.

The ultimate aim is to help ensure that today's students can meet the real-world demands of the 21st century and a rapidly evolving workplace.

This information will be important to our factory owners, computer repair businesses, retailers, and bank managers; it will be important for university admissions officers and college counselors; and it will be important for every American who wants to advance our nation's, and our region's, prosperity.

Even before the BP oil spill, unemployment in our region was unacceptably high—averaging 10 percent in April in the six Gulf Coast states.

But, as we brace ourselves for what may be more bad news, it's no time for despair.

The BP disaster is an urgent clarion call—a stark reminder of what can happen when our nation is not prepared. We must craft a long-term economic solution to ensure that every high school graduate in America is prepared for the pathway of challenges that lies ahead.

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