



Unskilled Workers and Public Education

The New York Times reports that many factories are ready to hire workers, but that applicants for jobs lack the skills in math and science to be productively employed in these good, high-technology jobs. Is this because government in America “invests” too little in education?

This could hardly be the case, because tax dollars for public schools gobble up an increasingly large percentage of tax dollars. Perhaps the problem is that public schools teach hard subjects like algebra and physics too little. Surely a large percentage of classroom time is spent in fluffy subjects, usually marinated in political correctness. But the idea that math and science can be force-fed to students is historical folly.



During the long, dreary reign of the Soviet Union, that worker’s paradise routinely turned out much larger numbers of engineers, scientists, mathematicians, and other professionals in hard sciences than American public schools and universities produced. Yet Soviet industry was a hopeless shambles and Soviet technology was dreadfully backwards. It was impossible to “command” scientific breakthroughs, technical innovations, or efficient industrial operations. Aside from a few very high profile projects, like Sputnik, the Soviet economy never showed any return on its educational investment in science, math, and engineering.

What about America? It has been the land of innovation, the home of efficiency, the nation that makes things work better. Why? Thomas Edison — who had almost no schooling and yet produced the first recorded sound, the first practical light bulb, the first workable ticker tape, and the first motion pictures — explained: “Genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.” Hard work by free citizens creates wonderful inventions. Andrew Carnegie, aside from creating vast amounts of cheap, high quality steel, also pioneered industrial cost accounting and counter-cyclical spending. (He built factories in hard times, when labor and materials were cheap, which helped end economic downturns.) Henry Ford, John Rockefeller, and other men who founded whole job-producing industries did so with the highest level of business and technical competence — and with almost no formal education at all.

The engine of the American economy is firmly based upon intelligent risk takers who try and try again. The microcomputer industry was not jump started by staid giants like IBM, full of men with college degrees, but by mavericks who were doing what other people thought could not be done. Americans who have created wildly successful, job-creating businesses used their minds and learned from their mistakes. They had the technical skills to create. But they did not always learn their skills in public schools or colleges. They learned in the real world.

Why do we have so many problems with unemployment today? We have moved far away from the world of risk-takers and self-made men. We are coming to look more and more like Europe, which has



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unemployment problems which seem never to go away. It is not the lack of job skills that plagues us. It is the lack of economic freedom.



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