

Investing in Jobs for the New Economy

The Issue

The demands of the 21st century's knowledge-based global economy cannot be denied. Young people entering today's labor market are competing for jobs with peers around the world. Fierce competition has led to companies moving many low-skill—and some high-skill—jobs to nations with cheaper labor costs. Education and skills are key to a secure future in the United States economy. Yet many young people and students from low-income families do not have access to viable career options because they do not have the requisite skills or knowledge to take advantage of the job opportunities that do exist.

Further, there are many high-wage, high-skill jobs in the United States that go unfilled because the current workforce has not received the requisite training. For example, in Chicago, 10,000 jobs in modern manufacturing need to be filled every year, and the current system provides only 5,000 qualified applicants. These are jobs that, on average, pay \$64,000 a year including benefits.

The Solution

To meet this challenge, our nation needs a cohesive national strategy that links substantial investment in job creation to an improved educational system, and directs significant public resources toward skill-development programs. Implementing that strategy will require farsighted national leadership; a substantial financial commitment; and a new working partnership among stakeholders in labor, business, education and government. With sound policies and strong growth, the new economy can generate millions of green jobs in environmentally sustainable technologies and alternative energy sources, as well as in other promising fields, from robotics to biotechnology.

The Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council, a bipartisan partnership of business, labor,

government and the community, has created a new high school that is meeting the challenge in dramatic fashion. One of its projects is Austin Polytechnical Academy, a public school in a Chicago community that traditionally has had low high school graduation rates and high unemployment. This year, Austin Polytechnical Academy will have 300 students engaged in a college prep curriculum—including pre-engineering—preparing them for careers in modern manufacturing in highly skilled production and management positions, as well as ownership. Thirty-seven local manufacturing companies are partners of this school and provide internships and summer jobs for these students, and students graduate with industry-recognized credentials.

Another highly regarded example of state-of-the-art career and technical education (CTE) schools is Aviation High School in Queens, N.Y. This school offers a program using a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) curriculum, and students graduate college- and career-ready, with the necessary certification from the FAA to enter high-wage jobs if they choose not to pursue college.

AFT's Role

The AFT has a strong history of supporting high-quality career and technical education programs that are grounded in rigorous academic standards and driven by assessments that lead to industry-recognized credentials. The AFT will work to include career and technical education teachers as part of a Green Economy Educational Initiative that will enhance the integration of academic instruction and career and technical education. We encourage schools to expose students early and often to a variety of career options and to teach the requisite skills the new economy will demand.

The AFT is ready to work with the business community, colleges and universities, research

institutes, local labor unions and every level of government to offer young people the preparation they require for the best jobs with the brightest future. Together, we can make CTE stand for “careers in technology and the environment.” Research demonstrates that high-level CTE programs have higher graduation rates than other programs because they are able to engage students and make the connection between school and work.

With the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, the AFT recently spearheaded an AFL-CIO policy statement that encourages skill development and education in high-need sectors, such as infrastructure, defense, green technologies, aerospace, renewable energy, education and healthcare, through state and federal financial aid programs. The resolution also calls for a renewed commitment to career and technical education by training students using the newest techniques, with 21st-century materials and high-tech tools, which will enable high schools to prepare students for all kinds of work-related, post-secondary and higher education.

Under this resolution, the AFT will work with the AFL-CIO to inform parents, youth and new job seekers about the availability of vocational opportunities for technical and apprentice training and education, and to lead the development of these efforts.