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Toward Better Vocational Education

For a favored sixth of the youth of this country, the educational system represents a pleasant pathway to a successful career. The remaining five-sixths are not so fortunate, and many find that their training has prepared them for nothing. Today skilled labor is in short supply. It is often necessary to wait weeks for services such as automobile repairs. Nevertheless, many young people are unemployed, including one out of every four nonwhite teen-agers.

As a nation we have been preoccupied with fostering excellence of a limited group while neglecting the overwhelming majority of our youth. One measure is federal expenditures. During the last fiscal year the government provided \$4.5 billion for higher education and only \$256 million for vocational education. Moreover, there have been many curriculum reform efforts benefiting college-bound students while vocational curricula have been little improved. One of our greatest mistakes has been to accord special prestige to a college degree while displaying indifference toward quality in craftsmanship. We reward verbal skill and abstract reasoning and deny dignity to manual workers.

A major source of many of our present domestic problems is that the educational system has not kept pace with the social changes around it. Much of the curriculum is admirably designed for the horse-and-buggy era. Today less than 5 percent of employment is on the farm. The big component of the labor force (about 45 percent) is white-collar workers. Among the blue-collar workers (about 37 percent), only about a tenth are employed as common laborers. In our society there is little place for the man or woman who has no special skill. If our increasingly technological society is not to deteriorate, we must find means of helping the young find useful roles whatever their particular aptitudes.

Under President Kennedy, a beginning was made in meeting this challenge with the passage of the Vocational Education Act of 1963. Among its many provisions was a mandate for periodic review by an Advisory Council on Vocational Education. The Council, under the chairmanship of Martin W. Essex, rendered its report* in December 1967, and many of its recommendations are being enacted into law.

Bills (H.R. 18366 and S. 3077) have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate unanimously, and a compromise conference version will be enacted. The bills authorize substantially increased funds for vocational education. The legislation attempts to correct deficiencies in both the federal and state administration of programs in vocational education. One mechanism is to earmark funds for such items as post-secondary training, training of groups with special needs, and exemplary and innovative projects.

The new legislation authorizes grants to colleges, universities, and other institutions for research and training programs. Support for development and dissemination of vocational educational curriculum materials is endorsed. The bills also give new emphasis to cooperative educational programs involving alternate periods of study and on-the-job training, and to residential vocational schools that would make it more feasible for disadvantaged youths to benefit from occupational training.

The new legislation will constitute a substantial step. However, the problem of preparing youth for the 21st century is now only being addressed. There is much need for involvement by many who have previously been oblivious to a great educational need.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* Advisory Council on Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, "Vocational Education: The Bridge Between Man and His Work"; published in condensed form as *Notes and Working Papers Concerning the Administration of Programs Authorized under Vocational Education Act of 1963* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1968).