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The High-Technology Fix

During the current severe recession, business and civic leaders in many communities are desperately seeking means to revive their areas' economies. They also are trying to position themselves to take advantage of the recovery when it comes. A number of regional leaders are pushing high technology as the answer. The models, of course, are Massachusetts, California, and, more recently, North Carolina. "Route 128" and "Silicon Valley" reverberate in the meeting rooms of chambers of commerce and regional economic development commissions across the country.

In the Pacific Northwest, for example, there has been extensive discussion by business leaders of the high-technology option for an economy where unemployment is substantially higher than for the nation and where a major public reinvestment in education will be required if the future of the area is to be secure. In these discussions, and surely across the land, the questions have been asked: How many Silicon Valleys and Route 128's can we have? If everyone tries for the high-technology fix, can everyone win? Can every area benefit by trying to be another high-technology area?

The answer to the last two questions is yes. Of course, not every region will achieve the same objective. But every region can benefit from trying, from aggressively adopting those policies and making those public and private investments which could lead to the next Silicon Valley or Route 128. The reason each region or state will benefit lies in the steps it must take to achieve high-technology status and the effects these steps will have.

The actions required are clear. First, there must be a substantial reinvestment by state and local government in quality education from preschool through graduate and professional education, including a new approach to vocational education and to job training programs. This should include strong support for research, as in North Carolina, and major initiatives to upgrade the quality of teaching, particularly in science, mathematics, English, and history. This support must include higher pay for master teachers. Second, the states must adopt tax structures which are progressive, which reward investment and research and development, and which tax consumption and income after profits. Third, there must be substantial reinvestment in urban and rural infrastructure, including transportation, cultural facilities, pollution control, parks, public safety, and institutions. Fourth, there must be corporate philanthropic investment in education and in cultural and charitable programs. Fifth, there must be new public-private-nonprofit cooperation in education, research, and community and industrial development. This must include substantial innovations by organized labor, particularly with respect to selection and reward systems for skilled workers and professionals and to the development of training programs.

The program outlined above, if pursued vigorously in each state and each major economic region, would provide some initial economic stimulus, and some areas would attract the new high-technology industry they seek. More important, however, would be the long-term contribution to building a solid base for a stronger industrial economy. Economic competition is increasingly on an international scale, and local and state as well as national investment is necessary to ensure that this country is competitive. Each region would, of course, develop quite differently. There will be only a few new Silicon Valleys, and just as Route 128 and Silicon Valley are very different from each other, so would be the parts of a revitalized nation. The high-technology fix will work, because it is a strategy of investment in brains and wits as well as a public-private partnership in support of an innovative economy and wise public policies. This fall, candidates for state legislatures and for Congress, who seek good issues to meet the severe economic strains so many regions are feeling, might well try this scenario. Even if they do not have 100 chip factories within 10 years, local business and community leaders can urge such a program with confidence that these bold steps will promote a strong economy.—BREWSTER C. DENNY, *Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle 98195*