

October 9, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Uneducated American

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

If you had to explain America's economic success with one word, that word would be "education." In the 19th century, America led the way in universal basic education. Then, as other nations followed suit, the "high school revolution" of the early 20th century took us to a whole new level. And in the years after World War II, America established a commanding position in higher education.

But that was then. The rise of American education was, overwhelmingly, the rise of public education — and for the past 30 years our political scene has been dominated by the view that any and all government spending is a waste of taxpayer dollars. Education, as one of the largest components of public spending, has inevitably suffered.

Until now, the results of educational neglect have been gradual — a slow-motion erosion of America's relative position. But things are about to get much worse, as the economic crisis — its effects exacerbated by the penny-wise, pound-foolish behavior that passes for "fiscal responsibility" in Washington — deals a severe blow to education across the board.

About that erosion: there has been a flurry of reporting recently about threats to the dominance of America's elite universities. What hasn't been reported to the same extent, at least as far as I've seen, is our relative decline in more mundane measures. America, which used to take the lead in educating its young, has been gradually falling behind other advanced countries.

Most people, I suspect, still have in their minds an image of America as the great land of college education, unique in the extent to which higher learning is offered to the population at large. That image used to correspond to reality. But these days young Americans are considerably less likely than young people in many other countries to graduate from college. In fact, we have a college graduation rate that's slightly below the average across all advanced economies.

Even without the effects of the current crisis, there would be every reason to expect us to fall further in these rankings, if only because we make it so hard for those with limited financial means to stay in school. In America, with its weak social safety net and limited student aid, students are far more likely than their counterparts in, say, France to hold part-time jobs while still attending classes. Not surprisingly, given the financial pressures, young Americans are also less likely to stay in school and more likely to become full-time workers instead.

But the crisis has placed huge additional stress on our creaking educational system.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the United States economy lost 273,000 jobs last month. Of those lost jobs, 29,000 were in state and local education, bringing the total losses in that category over the past five months to 143,000. That may not sound like much, but education is one of those areas that should, and normally does, keep growing even during a recession. Markets may be troubled, but that's no reason to stop teaching our children. Yet that's exactly what we're doing.

There's no mystery about what's going on: education is mainly the responsibility of state and local governments, which are in dire fiscal straits. Adequate federal aid could have made a big difference. But while some aid has been provided, it has made up only a fraction of the shortfall. In part, that's because back in February centrist senators insisted on stripping much of that aid from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aka the stimulus bill.

As a result, education is on the chopping block. And laid-off teachers are only part of the story. Even more important is the way that we're shutting off opportunities.

For example, the Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported on the plight of California's community college students. For generations, talented students from less affluent families have used those colleges as a stepping stone to the state's public universities. But in the face of the state's budget crisis those universities have been forced to slam the door on this year's potential transfer students. One result, almost surely, will be lifetime damage to many students' prospects — and a large, gratuitous waste of human potential.

So what should be done?

First of all, Congress needs to undo the sins of February, and approve another big round of aid to state governments. We don't have to call it a stimulus, but it would be a very effective way to create or save thousands of jobs. And it would, at the same time, be an investment in our future.

Beyond that, we need to wake up and realize that one of the keys to our nation's historic success is now a wasting asset. Education made America great; neglect of education can reverse the process.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)