

Forum: Charter school can start to fix city's woes

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Worse, close to two-thirds of those coming through the American educational pipeline are unfit to work in an innovative, technology-based economy. A minimum-wage job will be their life script. This economy changes so rapidly that half the existing jobs today will no longer exist by the time an 8th grader leaves high school.

The American economic crisis is fundamentally an educational crisis. Bluntly, we no longer have enough highly skilled workers to maintain the prosperity America has enjoyed for the past 50 years. Unless educational reform comes today, America's standard of living will continue to decline. It's not just jobs but high-wage jobs that are needed.

Until now our salvation has been in talented, well-educated immigrants. Congress severely limits that number in its attempt to appear to be saving American jobs. However, the reality is that high-wage jobs will migrate to wherever in the world the talent is. This is one of the meanings of the technology revolution. America is in denial.

Better preparation of our students must happen immediately, but it's not. Everyone knows that for over a decade between 50 and 80 percent of District 150's students have failed to meet basic expectations in reading, math and science. How long can we continue to squander such human potential?

The proposed charter school is an essential step in aggressively addressing our community's and nation's talent crisis. It will better prepare our children to compete in the new economy with its special focus on science, technology, engineering and math.

Can District 150 afford this kind of educational reform given that its finances are on life support? A balanced budget that just maintains the educational status quo will be a disaster for more children and the city of Peoria, as well.

Every year an increasing number of functionally illiterate kids flow into city streets. The cumulative effect is a growing pool of alienated, discouraged, jobless, resentful citizens. According to the Workforce Network, already there are more than 3,000 Peoria youth between ages 16 and 24 who are out of school and out of work.

Each year that pool grows. People move their families to other school districts. That will only stop when District 150 engages in significant educational reform. The charter school is not the entire solution, but it's a start in the right direction.

We are in an educational crisis: The majority of children aren't being prepared for the world in which they will live. We owe it to them and the community to initiate that reform today.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D.

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