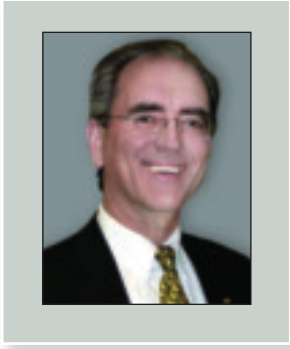


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

For what it's worth, I quite accidentally discovered the other day that Bill Clinton and I have something in common. I was watching an interview of him and to my surprise, he said that he spends an hour a day reading economic literature. So do I! He stressed that to understand the world of today, he has found this reading a must. I agree! I can't imagine anyone saying anymore that they, their work, and their profession are immune from what is happening in the economy. The economy is the issue of our day. To understand anything these days—environmental health included—some grounding in contemporary economics seems necessary.

As I pour through the economic literature, I often come across all kinds of fascinating material (though not fascinating enough to entice me to become an economist). One item in particular has caught my attention lately: the budget cuts being made in education.

My general understanding is that America's historical greatness can largely be explained by the commitment that this nation has made to education. A healthy economy is underpinned by a well-educated workforce. An educated workforce infuses inventiveness, productivity, research aspirations, quality products, efficiency, competitiveness, and sound decision making into an economy. Given the educational system we have in this country, it is not surprising that we have the world's largest economy. As state and local governments come to terms with their budget deficits, however, more and more are cutting back on their funding for education. According to the National Governor's Association

World Rankings of the U.S. ... Education ... NEHA

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and National Association for State Budget Officers, 13 states have made midyear budget cuts to K–12 schools already this fiscal year. Many more are expected to follow suit. Support for state universities is also being slashed by state after state.

I submit that these cutbacks are tantamount to a breathtaking dismantling of our educational system and therefore America's heretofore unchallenged economic prowess. (Serious economists are already talking about how China has surpassed Japan as the world's second-largest economy and how overtaking the United States is now merely a matter of time. I won't discuss the implications of such a change on the world stage as that is not the focus of my column.)

Yes, problems exist within the educational system that contribute to higher-than-necessary educational costs. Yes, we default numerous social issues to our school systems that undermine the system's ability to educate. And though I carry on as an "anti-cut" advocate for public and environmental health, I understand too clearly that cuts have to be

made and that no sector has an inalienable right to be exempt from cuts.

While I accept that budget cutting may be necessary, it is nonetheless instructive to consider what the consequences of this cutting are likely to be. In the case of education, I worry that cuts of the magnitude being carried out today are going to compromise the educational backbone that our success as a nation has depended on for at least the last century. That in turn has worrisome implications for our standing in the world and the quality of life that will be available to future Americans.

I justify this worry based on the following points that I have cobbled together from my read of the economic literature.

Five years ago, our National Academies were asked by a group of senators to recommend 10 federal governmental actions in science and technology that could be done to bolster America's competitiveness. Not surprisingly, their recommendations included such measures as improving K–12 education.

In a recent follow-up to the original report, it was noted that the outlook for America to compete for quality jobs in the world had deteriorated over the past five years. According to Charles Vest, the former Massachusetts Institute of Technology president, America now ranks 11th in the percentage of those aged 25–34 who have graduated from high school, 16th in college completion rates, 27th in the percentage of college students who obtain degrees in science or engineering, and 48th in the quality of our math and science education.

The College Board reports that the U.S., which was once the world's leader in college

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degrees for the segment of people 25–34 years old, is now ranked 12th among 36 developed countries.

Adding to this are issues of culture and student motivation. A 2008 survey of public high school teachers revealed that 21% thought absenteeism was a serious problem and 29% thought that apathy was a serious problem among students. The implication of this survey is that a disturbingly large number of high school students do not care about their education.

President Obama has noted that whoever out-educates us today is going to out-compete us tomorrow. And judging by the decline in our competitiveness (noted above) we are already being out-educating by a healthy margin.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan adds further clarity to this dismal picture. He has said that a quarter of U.S. high school students drop out or fail to graduate on time! In many urban areas, that figure is even higher.

A report written by a group of top retired generals and admirals offered the startling point that 75% of young Americans between 17 and 24 are unable to enlist in the military today because they have either not graduated from high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit!

In yet another study, “The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America’s Schools,” it is noted that in the 1950s and 1960s America led the world in K–12 education just as we led the world with our economy.

By contrast, according to the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment, the U.S. ranked 25th in math and 24th in science when learning and problem-solving skills for 15-year-olds were compared across 30 countries. That put us on a level with Portugal and the Slovak Republic.

This decline in education is taking place at the same time that global competition is intensifying and the economy is losing low-end jobs to job-replacing technologies. A poorly educated workforce costs us in terms of our productivity and our ability to create wealth. Unskilled workers and even skilled ones who merely show up for work are losing their jobs because higher levels of productivity for each dollar spent on salaries can now be found in readily available global

alternatives. The only people really succeeding in these economically difficult times are those who can imagine new services and products, invent more productive ways to get the job accomplished, achieve energy savings, or devise new ways to use or combine technologies. These successful people invariably have good educations.

Apart from the literature, I had a rather personal wake-up call when I recently had the opportunity to attend a lecture given by the acclaimed *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. He said something that night that almost knocked me out of my chair. He told the audience that for the first time in American history, the generation leaving the workforce was better educated than the one entering it! Shortly after and quite by serendipity, I read from the College Board that “it is expected that the educational level of the younger generation of Americans will not approach their parents’ level of education.”

Hardly believing what I was hearing and reading, I started hunting for more information to see if this was really true.

According to “Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce,” “among 30 OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] free market countries, the U.S. is the only nation where young adults are less educated than the previous generation.”

In “Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education,” the concluding paragraph reads, “In short, America’s educational strengths are heavily concentrated in the nation’s older population. Their successors in the workforce will be drawn from a smaller pool comprised primarily of young adults who, if current educational trends persist, are less likely to have college-level education and training. Because of this educational disparity, individuals with college-level skills may be in short supply, which may in turn severely limit individual opportunity and erode economic growth.”

Finally, in yet another paper, “The Ill-Prepared U.S. Workforce: Exploring the Challenges of Employer-Provided Workforce Readiness Training,” a survey of 217 employers reported that a third of newly hired high school graduates are deficiently prepared for their work, 21.7% of two-year college graduates are deficiently prepared,

and 17.4% of four-year college graduates are deficiently prepared!

As I often say in the columns I write, what are we to make of all this and where does NEHA fit into the picture?

To begin: obviously we as a nation have a problem. Furthermore, it seems that this problem is going to get worse before it has a chance to get better with the cutting currently taking place in educational programs throughout the country. And of course NEHA is not going to change the fundamental forces that are playing out in our budgets and shaping our educational systems. However ... NEHA can help!

As I have said before, associations today constitute the nation’s number one source for continuing education. Education is at the very heart of NEHA’s nonprofit 501(c)(3) status. Though NEHA is involved in a wide variety of different programs and initiatives, education reigns supreme across almost everything we do. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *NEHA is an educational machine!!*

No matter what economic literature I read, I hear three points stressed over and over when it comes to the topic of economics and education. Those points (expressed in various ways) boil down to the following:

- The strength of a nation is a function of the strength of its economy, which in turn is a function of how well educated its population is.
- The overall performance and funding of America’s educational system are in decline.
- These two points combine to suggest a poor prognosis for America’s standing in the world and the quality of life that will be available here.

While I have no intellectual quarrel with these points, I want to add a bit more to the story that seldom if ever gets any notice. To find this additional chapter to the story, we need to enter into the world of associations, where NEHA lives.

We have a system in this country that is capable of carrying on the educational task long after “students” have left the world of formal education. That system is comprised of the tens of thousands of associations that exist to educate, train and retrain, update skills, spur innovation, uncover new understandings, and so on.

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EH CALENDAR

UPCOMING NEHA CONFERENCES

June 18-20, 2011: Columbus, Ohio
2012: San Diego, California (dates to be determined)

NEHA AFFILIATE AND REGIONAL LISTINGS

California

April 19-21, 2011: CEHA 60th Annual Educational Symposium, presented by Mission Chapter, Ventura, CA. For more information, visit www.ceha.org

Colorado

September 28-30, 2011: CEHA 2011 AEC. Location TBD.

Idaho

March 16-18, 2011: IEHA Annual Educational Conference, Boise State University, Boise, ID. For more information, visit www.ieha.wildapricot.org

Michigan

March 16-18, 2011: MEHA Annual Education Conference, Traverse City, MI.

Minnesota

May 4-6, 2011: MEHA Annual Spring Conference, Ruttger's Bay Lake Lodge, Deerwood, MN. For more information, visit www.mehaonline.org/events

Nevada

August 9-11, 2011: Environmental Health: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, sponsored by the Nevada Environmental Health Association, Las Vegas, NV. For more information, contact Kimberly Fowler, email: nevadaeha@gmail.com

New Jersey

March 6-8, 2011: Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition, sponsored by the New Jersey Environmental Health

Association, Tropicana Resort and Casino, Atlantic City, NJ. For more information, contact NJEHA Executive Council, email: info@njeha.org

North Carolina

September 21-23, 2011: North Carolina Public Health Association Annual Education Conference, Charlotte Hilton University Place, Charlotte, NC. For more information, contact Anthony Williams, email: williaaa@forsyth.cc

Ohio

April 19-20, 2011: OEHA 2011 Annual Educational Conference, Worthington, OH. For more information, contact Luke Jacobs, email: luke.jacobs@hamilton-co.org

Utah

May 18-20, 2011: Annual Affiliate Conference, Bryce Canyon, UT. For more information, contact Brian Cowan, phone: (801) 399-7175

Wisconsin

April 27-28, 2011: WEHA Spring Education Conference, Green Bay, WI. For more information, visit www.weha.net

INTERNATIONAL LISTINGS

Canada

June 26-29, 2011: Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspector's 77th Annual Educational Conference, Halifax, NS. For more information, visit www.ciphi.ca/events

May 21-27, 2012: 12th IFEH World Congress on Environmental Health, sponsored by the International Federation of Environmental Health and the Lithuanian Union of Hygienists and Epidemiologists, Vilnius, Lithuania. For more information, visit www.ifeh2012.org/welcome

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Every day our staff looks for ways to bring you relevant and useful information. We work to enhance your working knowledge. We make the effort to keep you acquainted with new tools and new technologies. And we try to challenge you with new ways of thinking, novel concepts, stimulating debates, and different ideas about how you do your work.

Associations cannot make up the educational deficit that is opening up within our formal system of education. But we surely can help.

We can only help, however, if people put a value on continuing education and realize that such education is the ticket to success. If anyone out there thinks that environmen-

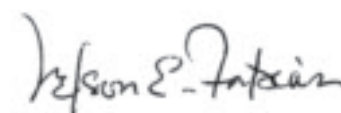
tal health work is going to be done the same way tomorrow as it is being done today, I have news for you! Governments and employers of all types have to find new and more productive ways to get the job done. We have to learn what those evolving ways of work look like.

In addition, we're facing challenges today, the likes of which we've never faced before (healthy communities, sustainability, global warming, bioterrorism, to name but a few). The only way to rise to these challenges and improve our effectiveness is to stay educated and never stop learning.

In the professional world, we don't lack the educational resources that we see disappearing in our formal system of education. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that far too many professionals are putting off or

outright ignoring their professional educational needs—despite the availability of education, sometimes at no cost, as is the case with the NEHA e-Learning program. That's a professional tragedy and a very demoralizing victory for apathy.

We are here for you. Take advantage of all that NEHA and even other associations have available for you. We have to reverse the trends playing out in the story of education in America. As the economic literature of our day makes convincingly clear, the consequences are simply too high if we don't.



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