

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Latin Youth Confront a New Economy

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The recession – the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930’s – has damaged the lives of millions of Americans. But Latinos have been especially hard hit, especially young people trying to enter the labor market for the first time.

The overall unemployment rate nationally may be at 9.7 percent and 11.5 percent for all Latinos. But the rate for Latino youth – ages 16 to 19 – is an astounding 28.6 percent. In some neighborhoods, the unemployment rate is approaching 50 percent. We know that Latinos also have the lowest rates of school enrollment and the highest rates of individuals without a high school diploma or GED. The result is a pending disaster for the future of Latino communities across the country and in New York City.

If there is anything positive emerging from the catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico caused by the explosion of a deep sea oil rig, it is that it will almost certainly end the nation’s giving lip service to alternative energy sources. The result could be a stimulus for the nation’s economy – a “green economy” - but only if the groundwork is laid for the expansion of basic work skills for many of the unemployed, especially young high school dropouts.

President Obama is focusing on what he calls the “green economy” in stimulating job growth out of the recession, jobs anticipated to be created by the development of clean, renewable energy technologies. He is talking about alternate energy to replace our dependence on oil and natural gas. Other serious changes – more reliance on solar energy, conservation, alternative energy for automobiles – are bound to come and should be put on a fast track.

In addition, the climate change challenge is creating whole new industries, new jobs, and new types of responsibilities within existing jobs. For instance, there is a policy in place in New York City to “green” commercial buildings – so that they achieve a more efficient use of their energy sources. The job that needs to be done for this to happen didn’t exist a few years ago.

But the challenge of this new economy means that basic skills are now more important than ever. Literacy and numeracy are necessary for most jobs. For the young, particularly those who have dropped out of school, a place in a new economy would appear to be unobtainable because of deep educational deficits.

There are a few organizations – such as STRIVE here in New York – that are training people for jobs in the new green economy. But even at STRIVE, trainees must already have a certain level of literacy and numeracy to successfully complete its core workshop and its Green Construction Training Program.

Last month, I testified before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. The hearing's subject was "Avoiding a Lost Generation: How to Minimize the Impact of the Great Recession on Young Workers." It focused on the challenges faced by younger workers and examined actions that can be taken to ensure that they are able to fully participate in an economic recovery.

I offered several actions and investments to help young people get necessary workforce experience. These include reauthorizing and increasing funding for the Workforce Investment Act with a focus on expansion of initiatives for out of school youth. Also, CSS has worked with Congressman Jerold Nadler on HR 2497, the Transportation Job Corps, a bill that would specifically target disconnected youth for basic skills training and pre-apprenticeship programs for jobs in the transportation industry.

It is these types of initiatives – teaching basic skills and targeting young dropouts – that would have the greatest effect in preparation for a changing economy. We need to invest in programs that help young people get workforce experience now, for the benefit of the economy and for their future.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.