



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
for Educational and Economic Opportunity

Avoiding the Disconnection Blues By Judith Taylor

"There is a disconnection between the skills that employers need to stay competitive and the skills that workers and job seekers bring to their search for family-sustaining careers." This was Judith Combes Taylor's message to a Key Issues Forum, sponsored by The Hartford Courant, the MetroHartford Alliance, and the Capitol Region Council of Governments. Taylor and four other experts discussed the workforce challenges facing the Hartford, Connecticut, region. Each speaker also prepared a commentary that appeared in The Hartford Courant.

Today, Hartford faces challenges that may be new, but they are not unique. Many communities across the nation, each in its own way, are encountering the same problems—a situation that provides a context for understanding the particular issues facing the Hartford region and sets the stage for identifying solutions.

Even as the economy falters, employers across the United States continue to experience a critical shortage of workers possessing the right qualifications for the available jobs, from the entry level to skilled industrial work, up to technical and professional positions. In surveys by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, firms have persistently identified the shortage of qualified workers as their No. 1 priority—even as unemployment and layoffs both rise.

Why? Because competitiveness requires workers with higher and higher skill levels. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that by the end of the decade, more than 40 percent of jobs will require a postsecondary education; in 2000, the figure was already approaching 30 percent. Yet at the same time, college graduation rates are falling.

In surveys by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, firms have persistently identified the shortage of qualified workers as their No. 1 priority—even as unemployment and layoffs both rise.

In other words, there is a disconnection between the skills that employers need to stay competitive and the skills that workers and job seekers bring to their search for family-sustaining careers. And this disconnect is most serious in many of the same cities that were only recently booming, from Hartford to St. Louis to Atlanta. In each case, "good" jobs have moved out and into the surrounding suburbs. In St. Louis, for example, the city's share of jobs in its region has dropped from 85 percent to 30 percent over the past five decades. Here in Connecticut, Hartford now accounts for only 28 percent of capital-region jobs.

What about the people left behind? Increasingly, they are disconnected from employment opportunities, and even from the culture of work that goes with them. With rising—and persistent—unemployment, young people not only do not find work; sometimes, unemployment is the only "role model" they see around them. They can't see the connection between school, especially education beyond high school, and well-paying jobs; education levels are dismally low. Contrast Hartford and its immediate suburbs. In Hartford, only 27 percent of the residents 16 or older perform at the eighth-grade level or above; in East Hartford, the comparable figure is 52 percent, and in West Hartford, it's 69 percent.

Several challenges stand in the way of solving these problems.

First, there are very few jobs that let people start with few skills and work their way to family-supporting jobs. Gone are the "ladders" through which a person can rise in one workplace or across workplaces. Start work at minimum wage and you could remain there decades later.

Second, today's economy is changing rapidly, making it very difficult for a person to know what kinds of jobs are out there and what preparation is required for them. This lack of information is particularly acute in inner cities, where family and friends tend to have fewer connections to good jobs than their counterparts in the suburbs.

Third, while businesses search for well-trained employees within a community or region, just as job seekers search for careers, public resources are at the state and federal levels. And regions are difficult to mobilize. As a result, employers and low-skill workers often don't know where to go to get help.

Indeed, political power lies elsewhere, at the federal level and especially in states. Neither of them "get it." That is, they aren't aware of how this crisis plays out in a city like Hartford and how this represents a long-term threat to the national economy. And the very solutions that the United States has tried—particularly welfare reform and the Workforce Investment Act—have largely fallen short of meeting the challenge. There are a number of reasons, but among them is their failure to address the disconnect between the needs of job seekers and the needs of employers. •