

GORDON REPORT, April 2020
from Imperial Consulting Corporation

“Job Pandemic 2020”

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting the daily lives of Americans and sowing anxiety, outrage, and confusion. Fear is mounting with every update on the number of new cases and deaths. Hundreds of thousands of American workers, perhaps as high as 30 percent, are facing sudden unemployment with uncertain future prospects in a time of severe labor-market disruptions. Adaptability will be key for those seeking employment as some industry sectors shed workers and others need to add new staff rapidly.

New York City, a major COVID-19 hot spot, is experiencing a major shortage of medical personnel. Mayor Bill de Blasio pleaded for a national draft of medics where they are most needed. He admitted, “I don’t see honestly, how we’re going have the professionals we need to get through this crisis.” A physician in Chicago said he was torn between flying to New York and preparing his hospital for the coronavirus onslaught. “There’s a pull in myself to stay at my institution and help when the problem gets here.”

SKILL SHORTAGES AN UNRELENTING PROBLEM

Over the past decade we have been warning that the education and skills of the U.S. workforce have not kept up in the race with technology. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that with more than 500,000 nurses retiring by 2022, 1.1 million new RNs will be needed to avoid a nursing shortage. Projections Central estimates over 200,000 average annual openings for RNs between 2016 and 2026, far more than the number that are graduating and being licensed. The United States has only 2.6 physicians per 1,000 people; in contrast Germany has 4.3 and Italy 4 per thousand. Moreover, 30 percent of American physicians are over the age of 60, so retirements will soon further deplete their ranks. America also is experiencing growing shortages of dentists, dental hygienists, many types of medical technicians, physical therapists, and other medical personnel.

The COVID-19 crisis is placing an unprecedented strain on America’s health system and medical personnel at a time when staffing shortages are already widespread. The proportion of Americans over 65, an age group with more healthcare needs, is also rapidly growing. These considerations are increasing the urgency of revamping education-to-employment systems to prepare more students for careers in the health sciences once schools can again resume normal operations. This effort needs to begin with improving math and science education and reading proficiency at the elementary and secondary levels. Students also need to learn about the variety of careers in health sciences, related technical areas, and the other economic sectors that provide employment in their regions along with the educational prerequisites

for obtaining degrees or certificates in different careers. Too many students at present are dropping out of college-level programs due to inadequate educational preparation.

The launch of Sputnik in 1957 triggered the Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union and heightened the threat of nuclear warfare. Fearing that the United States was losing ground in science and engineering, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958 that provided federal assistance for strengthening science, math, and foreign language programs at all levels and instituted a loan program for college and university students. This stimulated local and regional K-12 and higher education programs to develop new initiatives and tighten standards. Parents were encouraged to assist through daily support of educational activities at home and in school. This crisis spurred the growth of the American aeronautic and defense industries with a consequent surge of jobs and careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) areas.

The 1958 act resulted in some islands of excellence in math and science education and boosted college and university attendance, but it had little lasting impact on overall educational attainment. Through the passing decades the lack of esteem for education in American popular culture has eroded funding for schooling at the state and local levels. Due to a lack of communication and support from other community sectors, education programs often are not producing graduates with the knowledge and skills local employers need.

MOVING FORWARD

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing everyone to adopt new perspectives and set new priorities. What can we do to put the United States on course for a stronger tomorrow? This is a watershed moment in our history, and it has highlighted the importance of local leadership in finding community resources to meet this emergency and keeping local populations informed. Will this foster a new wave of community activism?

Like Sputnik, the COVID-19 crisis should provide the wake-up call that alerts the American general public to the urgency of reinventing the education-to-employment system to produce workers with the needed skills and credentials for the demanding medical, technological and scientific careers of the 21st century. We have in the past reported on the Regional Talent Innovation Networks (RETAINs), public-private community partnerships, that are successfully organizing regional talent-delivery systems supporting systemic change. Can you be part of the local leadership that does this for your community?

Edward E. Gordon is president and founder of Imperial Consulting Corporation (www.imperialcorp.com). His book, *Future Jobs: Solving the Employment and Skills Crisis* – winner of an Independent Publishers award, is now available in an updated 2018 paperback edition.