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A Groundbreaking Book: *Maximum Impact Education*

Much has already been written about the labor market revolution that is changing jobs and careers around the planet. Jack Oakes' *Maximum Impact Education: Six Strategies to Raise Student Achievement* (Rowman & Littlefield, September 2015) makes a major contribution as a hands-on practitioner's guide identifying regional causes and solutions for a pervasive skills-jobs talent disconnect.

Jack Oakes' lifelong goal has been to provide more students with the education needed to achieve the American middle-class dream of useful citizenship and rewarding careers in occupations best suited to their aptitudes and interests. His prescription is for bottom-up change. Oakes' message for a broader community audience is both empowering and challenging. He has written a guidebook drawn from personal experience on how to establish a successful comprehensive career-academy high school anywhere in the United States.

This is a success story! The author gives an engaging account of how the High School Inc. Foundation began and implemented a change process to bring together students, parents, educators, business people, and local government leaders in forming a new shared vision. Achieving this vision took time, and its evolution continues.

Today Santa Ana Valley High School has six CHANGE Career Academies:

- C Culinary Arts
- H Health
- A Automotive/Transportation/Logistics
- N New Media
- G Global Business
- E Engineering (IT)

These CHANGE academies represent the community's vision of the present and future business sectors for career employment across the region.

Maximum Impact Education focuses on Jack's step-by-step journey with many other local community leaders. They have faced such obstacles as economic challenges, resistance to culture change and systemic reform, and hurdles in mobilizing civic activism on their road to establishing career education for all students in their community and elsewhere. *Maximum Impact Education* provides useful insights on the work needed to gradually overcome the silos that divide people in local communities as they struggle to rebuild relevant education-to-employment systems for America's rapidly changing labor market. "[This] is not a theoretical model, but a practitioner's handbook. He deftly shows how and why his strategies can benefit all students," attests Dr. Al Mijares, Superintendent, Orange County Department of Education.

The High School Inc. Foundation is a good example of what I call a Regional Talent Innovation Network (RETAIN). In *Maximum Impact Education* Jack Oakes relates how these efforts began in the late 1990s to cope with changing demographics and the unmet skill demands of community employers. People were leaving the area. Businesses were closing or moving elsewhere. The community tax base was being seriously threatened.

Today across the United States a rising number of businesses struggle to find the skilled workers they need. They have limited funds to train workers and often fear that if they do provide training, the workers will be poached by others. The High School Inc. Foundation is supported by hundreds of such businesses that are working together by giving their time, talent, and financial contributions to help develop career programs that teach students the skills needed for current employment in their firms as well as skills they foresee needing in the future. “The story of how Santa Ana discovered the power of the ‘Business and Education Connection,’” states David Elliot, President/CEO, Santa Ana Chamber of Commerce, “is an important one for every town, city, and community in America.”

That is Jack’s most important message. Comprehensive career-academy community high schools can be broadly implemented anywhere in the United States. This educational updating process is both doable and urgently needed. Such academies enable students to make more informed choices regarding the options for post-secondary career preparation ranging from careers requiring professional or bachelor’s degrees to the less publicized middle-job options requiring career-specific certificates, apprenticeships, or associate’s degrees.

Already over 2,000 comprehensive career-academy high schools throughout the United States are helping to lay the foundation of 21st century careers for more students by providing them with a higher quality high school education. They recognize that one vital curriculum component is an excellent liberal arts education to help students develop their thinking and problem-solving skills. In a global economy students need to know more about the world in which they live. A liberal arts education including history, geography, literature, and the abilities to write well, read in depth, and speak well are now prerequisites for advancement in most careers. Career education and information also are needed so that more students can make better informed choices regarding in-demand career areas that match their personal aptitudes and interests. As Jack points out, this is not an either/or proposition – both are needed and more. As Albert Einstein once said, “A person who has only a technical education is stupid.”

Most higher-paying jobs now require that entering and incumbent workers have a higher quality general education and specific career skills that will need continuous updating throughout their working lives. While these workplace demands are real, our culture’s response has fallen behind.

In the early 20th century the United States was the first nation in history to organize a universal K-12 educational system. We created a “knowledge equilibrium” that gave the majority of Americans the education and skills needed for success in life and in the workplace. This was a significant factor in the creation and growth of America’s middle class and the power behind the economic success story of the United States.

But today after 30 years of so-called reforms, America has failed to raise its “knowledge equilibrium” for a new 21st-century labor-market era. Instead, our culture is very adept at maintaining a limiting and outdated 20th-century education system.

About two hundred years ago, a group of English textile workers who were called “Luddites” began smashing early weaving machines in an attempt to stop this industrial advancement. Today the “New Luddites” are among us. Whether they are on Wall Street, Main Street, or in the

bureaucracies of education or government, they are highly proficient defenders of the power, prestige, and funds supporting an antiquated education-to-employment system designed for a vanishing 20th-century labor market.

Successful RETAINs are now being built by community and civic activism. They were begun by enlightened local leaders from many community sectors who are concerned about their regions' future economic survival. In Santa Ana, the Chamber of Commerce, local school district, businesses, government agencies, and other organizations worked together to develop a new "shared vision" of talent and workforce development and to implement structural changes that updated its education-to-employment system. Over 1,000 RETAINs are now in existence throughout the United States. What about your region?

There are four basic guiding principles behind the Regional Talent Innovation Network (RETAIN) Movement:

1. RETAINs are non-profit entities that act as intermediaries to bring together an array of community businesses, educational institutions, government agencies, and economic and social service programs into a new collaborative mix. The purpose is to rebuild the regional education-to-employment service delivery system.
2. RETAINs do not duplicate services already in existence nor create another layer of bureaucracy. Instead, they better harmonize those that already exist and devise new ways of ascertaining that funding streams from the 20th century are updated and new ones secured to blend K-12, career education, and adult training for jobs in a 21st-century economy.
3. RETAINs help regions come together and create a new vision of what's needed today. How can more students be better prepared for a 21st-century society? What can be done to help businesses keep up with the technical breakthroughs/processes/management structures etc. that employees must learn, understand, and apply to innovate and improve performance, productivity and profit?
4. RETAINs are excellent examples of the American free enterprise system at work. They are all about building today for a better tomorrow. They make sure that everyone understands that developing human capital is the community's primary goal. Through their inclusiveness RETAINs bring all segments of communities together, thus facilitating the flow of ideas and allowing the best ones to win through and be implemented.

The United States has always been about the future through building better opportunities for the next generation. *Maximum Impact Education* is a call for every community to remember this heritage, to renew its commitment to building the future, and to better prepare more people with the education and skills needed for success in the 21st century.

Edward E. Gordon is the president of Imperial Consulting Corporation (www.imperialcorp.com). His latest book is *Future Jobs: Solving the Employment and Skills Crisis* (Praeger, 2013) which is a 2015 Independent Publishers Book Award winner.