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An Education Revolution Unfolds, Outside Washington

In a new educational revolution, the standard public education is being expanded into prekindergarten through two years of community college, where many young Americans learn modern job skills.

By Gerald F. Seib

A century ago, a grass-roots drive revolutionized public education for American children. The high-school movement took hold in communities across the land, spreading the idea that the basic education that society provided needed to run from first grade through four full years of high school.

Modernizing workplaces demanded workers with a high-school education, so cities, towns and states decided to provide them. High schools proliferated. The number of students enrolled in public high schools rose almost ninefold in the first three decades of the 20th century. The American economy benefited for decades more.

Today, a similar movement is taking shape. And once again, it's gathering steam not in the nation's capital, where ideas more often go to die these days. Rather, this is a case study in how innovative ideas are taking

shape in cities and states across the country.

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In this new educational revolution, the standard public education is being transformed beyond the long-prevailing pattern of kindergarten through 12th grade. Steadily, that standard is being expanded into prekindergarten through two years of community college, where many young Americans learn modern job skills. That is the package more cities and states are guaranteeing their children.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, whose city is at the forefront of the movement, calls it a “quiet revolution.” He adds: “This is the world. Meaning 75% of the jobs coming to Chicago require two years of postsecondary education. And we hadn’t done a thing to prepare people.”

So Chicago has instituted a program that allows tuition-free education at one of Chicago’s seven two-year community colleges to anyone who graduates from the city’s public high schools with a B average. Some 6,200 Chicago students have taken advantage of the program, 80% of them from the first generation in their families to attend college. It’s probably not a coincidence that high-school graduation rates are rising as well.

At the same time, Chicago has moved to expand the educational opening at the other end of the age scale by guaranteeing prekindergarten programs for the city’s children. Mr. Emanuel argues that preparing students better at the front end helps improve their odds of success at the back end, making the investment in an expanded public education more effective overall.

“Kids drop out of college in third or fourth grade,” Mr. Emanuel says, meaning they can fall behind then and never catch up. “And if you want them to succeed in third and fourth grade, you need to start with them when they’re three or four years old.”

Chicago is unusual only in that it is seeking to expand the guaranteed education at both ends of the age spectrum simultaneously. Similar movements to do one or the other are under way across the country.

Tennessee, Oregon, Rhode Island, Arkansas, Hawaii and Nevada, among others, are experimenting with programs to provide cost-free community-college educations. So are other cities in addition to Chicago. All told, such programs are in place in 44 states, says the College Promise Campaign, which advocates for the idea.

Similarly, pre-K programs are proliferating. San Antonio, New York City, Washington, D.C.—all are in on the act. The National Institute for Early Education Research reports that 43 states offer some sort of government-funded pre-K education. The Obama administration pushed a “Preschool for All” program to send grants to states for early education programs, though those grants have been cut back by the Trump administration.

And there is the longstanding Head Start program to give federal help for pre-K education. Still, states and cities are in the lead.

The drive to expand guaranteed free education may seem to be a program for the poor, but it’s at least as much a benefit for middle-class families. Lower-income families already get government help through the federal Head Start program and, often, financial aid after high school. Wealthy families can afford to pay for pre-K and have tax-advantaged college-savings programs. And, as the current college admissions scandal shows, the wealthy can leverage spots in elite universities.

It’s often the middle-class families who find themselves stuck, without either the resources of their own or the government help needed to pay for pre-K or college.

This evolution is business-friendly as well. Business leaders often complain that they aren’t finding workers with the 21st-century skills they need, and they often point to community-college education as the best answer. In Chicago, each of the city’s seven community colleges stresses a skill useful to Chicago businesses—health care, information technology, manufacturing—and businesses open their doors to graduates.

In presidential campaign circles, Democrats are

debating whether to endorse free, universal four-year college education. Outside of the national political hothouse, though, it turns out a quiet transformation already is under way.

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