

Joblessness and the Skills Gap

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I'm somewhat disoriented realizing that the "Great Recession" we're living through today is beginning to show some of the characteristics that my generation saw as the "bad old days," never to be experienced again.

Two things triggered these thoughts - the announcement that New York City's unemployment rate just jumped to 10.6 percent, higher than the average for the nation, and the Stuyvesant Town default involving billions of dollars and tens of thousands of middle class renters. Why these two issues? Because they represent how serious the crisis is, but also how different this recession is from the meltdown in the 1930s.

This recession hasn't been borne equally along class lines in New York City. It hasn't created the sense of urgency that propelled the New Deal, the WPA, and Mayor LaGuardia's creation of the Health and Hospital Corporation.

The evidence seems to indicate that unemployment among the college educated is negligible. It's those without a college degree who are taking the hit. Nationally, nearly 25 percent of black men without a high school education are out of work. In New York City, those kinds of numbers spell long-term trouble, because the city hasn't paid much attention to young people not on track to go to four-year colleges.

A recent study the Community Service Society issued in collaboration with the Center for an Urban Future, "[Closing the Skills Gap: A Blueprint for Preparing New York City's Workforce to Meet the Evolving Needs of Employers](#)," examined what employers are currently requiring and will need in the future, the mismatch between employer needs and the education and skills of much of the existing future workforce was astonishing.

The city has one of the worst rates of community college graduation, the highest failure rate for the GED test, and a high school dropout rate that - despite years of reform - is still among the highest in the country, particularly for black and Latino men.

A thorough reform of the GED system has already been committed to by the State Board of Regents. The city recently agreed to present a comprehensive reform of its approach to the GED. A focus on Career and Technical Education (CTE), begun by the Department of Education in a number of model CTE programs, has to be expanded to all CTE programs. The city's Human Resources Administration has to make sure that GED programs are an integral part of all its benefit programs.

The longer we delay in dealing with the problem, the more of a drag it will be on the city in maintaining its position as a world leader.