

Aug. 29, 2007

Q&A: Harold McGraw III **President and CEO, McGraw-Hill Companies** ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 "What is Ready?" cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Harold "Terry" McGraw III is president and chief executive officer of McGraw-Hill Companies and chairman of the Business Roundtable, an association of CEOs of American companies.

Editor: What is "ready"? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

McGraw: Twenty-five years ago students from adjacent school districts would compete for the same jobs; today students in the United States compete with those from around the world. We are all mindful that students need to leave high school or college ready to compete in this flat world. They must be able to think analytically and communicate effectively, as well as possess the skills that are prized globally and solve problems creatively.

People entering the workforce not only must have good reading, writing and math skills, they also must be able to communicate and work productively on teams with people who speak other languages, think in unfamiliar patterns, and live in different cultures halfway around the world.

Globalization is also placing new importance on the subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The United States is facing a critical talent gap in these subjects. In order to stay competitive in a global economy, we must improve math and science education and inspire American youth to study and enter these fields.

Editor: How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

McGraw: There are many pockets of excellence and wonderful examples where districts and states have succeeded in boosting student achievement. There are, however, opportunities to strengthen our education infrastructure.

There is consensus that states should maintain high quality standards against which progress can be measured and each student's needs can be identified and addressed. We must continue to build on the principles of the education reform movement, one that should extend from preschool through secondary school and beyond.

We must continue to improve alignment of pre-kindergarten, K-12 and higher education and career development; make greater use of technology to make learning more efficient and effective, as well as provide customized learning plans to meet individual needs; and support the push to expand early learning opportunities.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

McGraw: As our population grows, teachers are faced with larger classes of students who have varied needs. This environment can create challenges for teachers who are trying to make the most effective use of the time they have with students. Technology gives teachers and administrators the power to customize and target instruction so that students with different and varied needs can learn in the same setting and help maximize the time they spend in the classroom.

The promise of technology also increases productivity of teachers, creates opportunities for online and distance learning, and provides many other opportunities to improve teaching and learning. We must do all we can to leverage valuable digital and online solutions to help boost student performance.

Editor: What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching "readiness" skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

McGraw: No one size fits all. We need to ensure that schools and districts accommodate different learning styles.

There are three important lessons worth remembering though when we think about how to replicate successful programs. First, time and again, we have witnessed that by raising standards and providing the resources to help students perform to those standards, educators are better positioned to help students succeed.

Second, there are significant advantages of early learning programs. Quality preschool programs achieve promising results, both short-term benefits such as improved student performance in the early grades as well as long-term benefits such as high rates of high school completion. As a result, we should strengthen and widen opportunities for our youngest students.

And third, we must support continuing modernization of our middle and high schools to make sure that they are preparing our students for the 21st century economy. We must see improved state and national education performance at all levels -- from pre-K through graduate school -- with a focus on the policy changes needed to produce measurable results.