

The danger in dumbing down

While California cuts math requirements, our economic rivals aren't so foolish

By

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The controversy over American jobs going overseas has so far largely overlooked the key factor of poor-quality American education. American companies, faced with a domestic labor pool deficient in even basic knowledge and skills, are financing the math and science education of students in foreign countries. Yet despite the implications of this trend, California has reduced the difficulty of math requirements for students.

In communist China, computer software colleges are being built at 35 universities around the country. At Beijing University's School of Software, which opened in 2002, Chinese students take advantage of state-of-the-art labs funded by IBM, Sun Microsystems, Motorola, Oracle and other American high-tech giants. So far, the American firms have given \$2 million in grants, donations and equipment to the school. U.S. companies want well-educated foreign students to staff their overseas operations and the new software colleges in China base their curriculum on the needs of American industry.

Within three years, the Software College at Beijing University will have 3,800 students specializing in subjects such as integrated-circuit design and information security. Much of the instruction will be in English.

In China, 58 percent of the degrees awarded in 2002 were in the physical sciences and engineering, compared to just 17 percent in the U.S. China awarded 220,000 engineering bachelor's degrees vs. 60,000 awarded by U.S. universities. The San Jose Mercury News reports that "[w]ith the benefits of massive foreign investment and training, a booming economy and a national mandate, China is poised to surge ahead - and perhaps to one day rival American leadership in technology."

So how is California, home of Silicon Valley, meeting this foreign challenge? The latest trend has been for school districts to plead with the state to waive the algebra requirement for high-school seniors to graduate this year. Judy Pinegar, manager of waivers at the state Department of Education, says the number of districts asking the state for waivers "is increasing algebraically" and that the department is "getting tons of calls." State lawmakers will likely introduce legislation to postpone the algebra requirement for at least one year.

The state's retreat on algebra comes on top of its decision to reduce the difficulty of the math portion of the high-school exit exam, which students in the class of 2006 have to pass in order to graduate. Students no longer have to calculate the lower quartile, median and maximum of a data set. Instead, the number of questions asking students to calculate averages, a sixth-grade skill, increased.

After taking the exam, Bharath Venkat, a 16-year-old Modesto high-schooler, said the test "was middle school stuff." Venkat observed: "I thought it was going to be harder. I thought it would be based on junior or senior year stuff. It is the high-school exit exam." While the test is easier, students still only need to get 55 percent of the math questions right in order to pass.

The global economic race will be won in part by the quality of education of countries' work forces. Too many of our educators whine about diverse student populations and racially biased tests, while our foreign competitors focus on high expectations and merit. If our educators fail to see the bigger economic picture, they are consigning our nation to a very scary future.