

Des Moines Register Guest Opinions on Essential Workers

Part One: Congress should support workers and families to complete the federal investment infrastructure

Next, Congress must return to providing more permanent infrastructure for investments in human capital.

Charles Bruner, Guest columnist, August 8, 2022, retrieved at:
<https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/iowa-view/2022/08/11/inflation-reduction-act-infrastructure-arpa-human-capital-next/10288090002/>

Congress's agreement on the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 and earlier enactment of the bipartisan Infrastructure and Investment Act of 2021 have special importance to children, their families and the future. With these pieces of legislation, Congress will have delivered on three elements of a public sector infrastructure for the 21st century – physical, environmental, and medical care.

What remains is making permanent the investments in a fourth element of that public infrastructure – human capital. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 initiated investments there, but these were time-limited.

Now, those concerned about that public human capital infrastructure – and particularly the supports that ensure a healthy and educated next generation of adults – must insist that actions started in the American Rescue Plan Act be made permanent. We should applaud the steps taken on the first three elements, but we must work to complete the task on what is, in many respects, the most important infrastructure of all – our people.

This human capital infrastructure is key to a strong private sector economy, where higher skills are needed to compete and lead in a world economy. It is key to a productive current workforce, as those employed in the private sector also must meet dual demands as breadwinners and caregivers. And, it is key to a growing middle class and broadly shared prosperity, which the private economy cannot deliver alone.

President Biden has articulated the elements of such an infrastructure – and there are champions for each within Congress. Initial steps were included in the American Rescue Plan Act that established a base. They include:

- Child care and preschool that enable families to work and ensure children continue to learn and grow as they do
- Family and medical leave that provides options to parents to fulfill their most important caregiving and nurturing roles to their children and support to members with special needs.
- An expanded, refundable, and monthly child tax credit that finally fully accounts for the cost of raising children.
- Full funding of the Americans with Disabilities Education Act, which directly enables children with disabilities to achieve their potential and ensures that schools are equipped to do so.
- Increased federal funding for Title I, to ensure equal educational opportunities for low-income children and high poverty schools.
- An expanded community health workforce in underserved urban and rural communities to reduce health disparities.
- An expanded and better compensated direct care workforce providing home and community-based and congregate care to enable seniors and persons with disabilities to live in dignity.
- Support for primary, preventive, and developmental health services enabling health practitioners to respond to social as well as medical determinants of health, particularly crucial for children’s healthy development.
- Improvements to Medicaid coverage and payments, particularly in the prenatal to age one period for mothers and infants.
- Affordable opportunities for post-secondary education, increasingly essential for people to advance in the private sector workforce.

These all have economic as well as social benefits. The private sector is a primary force in our economic future, but it also depends upon a strong human capital infrastructure in doing so. This infrastructure is a fundamental public responsibility, not investments that can or should be borne by business and the entrepreneurial private sector economy.

For our country’s future, these elements require investments at least commensurate with those made in the first three elements. Taken together, they also have a very powerful constituency – if we join forces in support of all of them.

Part Two: Financing a 21st-century public infrastructure starts with valuing workers

We cannot afford not to invest, which means we must establish a federal tax base that makes it possible to do so without expanding the federal deficit.

Charles Bruner, Guest columnist, August 18, 2022 (retrieved at: <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/iowa-view/2022/08/18/congress-public-infrastructure-work-incomplete-without-paying-key-workers/10288098002/>)

Covid-19 made clear the most essential role workers providing direct care, child care, community health, and education play not only in times of a pandemic, but as part of our public infrastructure. Covid-19 also has shown the need to expand both the size and the compensation of this workforce to meet the needs of Americans and foster continued prosperity.

We cannot afford not to invest, which means we must establish a federal tax base that makes it possible to do so without expanding the federal deficit.

Financing for the American Rescue Plan Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act did that for other elements of our public infrastructure. They more than covered their investments, largely by paring back a small share of recent tax breaks to the wealthiest individuals and corporations enacted within the Jobs and Tax Cut Act.

These, however, did not address some of the most costly tax provisions in that law, ones that solely benefited the highest income and wealthiest amongst us. The Jobs and Tax Cut Act now requires full review and revision in the context of what each of its provisions produces in public benefits – in the context of what equivalent investments in a human capital infrastructure produce.

The concentration of wealth not only represents a concern from a social perspective, but represents a fundamental economic one. Concentration limits the broad sharing of prosperity from the economy and limits opportunities for innovation and jobs providing family-sustaining employment.

The 21st century private sector economy now requires an increasingly educated workforce – but in many respects a smaller one, as automation, technology, and artificial intelligence involve greater capital but less labor to heighten productivity. The result of this is that the demand side of the economy – the middle class – is subject to shrinkage.

The private sector will continue to increase productivity through technology and automation – and this can be a good thing. Yet those with the most capital also will receive the largest direct economic benefit. To share prosperity broadly, two things must occur.

First, the public sector contribution to the human capital infrastructure must not only be viewed as a support for private sector growth and jobs but also as a part of the economy – and a producer of jobs that establish full employment and high quality employment. These are jobs that involve personal relationships and social skills and cannot be replaced by machines and technology. They are in increasing demand in our society.

Second, government needs to ensure that capital holders do not receive excess profits and that the market economy is not monopolized. A competitive private sector economy that advances entrepreneurship must be protected.

President Biden's plan for a 21st century caregiving and education workforce emphasizes the value of those working in caring and educating roles and their need to be compensated for that value. For too

long, child care workers, direct care workers in home-and-community based services and care facilities, and other helpers on the frontline have been among the lowest paid workers in society.

These workers' families have struggled economically to raise their own children. Increasing their compensation and numbers commensurate with their value to society helps avoid burnout and enables them to stay in their careers. It provides continuity of care to those they serve, essential to quality. It contributes to local economies, increasing the overall tax base and consumer demand and reducing the need for safety net programs.

The current caregiving and education workforce comprises nearly 20 percent of all workers and a greater portion of all voters. Adding those they serve and those who recognize their value in the economy, we constitute a powerful constituency. The key to our collective impact is our collective voice, holding lawmakers (and during elections, candidates), accountable for making such investments a priority. Our children and our future depend upon it.

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