

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Rich man's epiphany (part 2)

On Tuesday we published excerpts from a multi-millionaire's essay in *The Nation* magazine regarding public schools and children in poverty. He made (to him) the startling discovery that schools can't solve inequality in America.

He calls the belief that schools can do it all "educationism."

More of his thoughts follow:

**By Nick Hanauer**

A major theme in the educationist narrative involves the "skills gap"—the notion that decades of wage stagnation are largely a consequence of workers not having the education and skills to fill new high-wage jobs. If we improve our public schools, the thinking goes, and we increase the percentage of students attaining higher levels of education, particularly in the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and math—the skills gap will shrink, wages will rise, and income inequality will fall.

The real story is more complicated, and more troubling. Yes, there is a mismatch between the skills of the present and the jobs of the future. In a fast-changing, technologically advanced economy, how could there not be? But this mismatch doesn't begin to explain the widening inequality of the past 40 years.

In 1970, when the golden age of the American middle class was nearing its peak and inequality was at its nadir, only about half of Americans ages 25 and older had a high-school diploma or the equivalent. Today, 90 percent do. Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans attaining a college degree has more than tripled since 1970. But while the American people have never been more highly educated, only the wealthiest have seen large gains in real wages. From 1979 to 2017, as the average real annual wages of the top 1 percent of Americans rose 156 percent (and the top .01 percent's wages rose by a stunning 343 percent), the purchasing power of the average American's paycheck did not increase.

Some educationists might argue that the recent gains in educa-

tional attainment simply haven't been enough to keep up with the changing economy—but here, yet again, the truth appears more complicated. While 34 percent of Americans ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, only 26 percent of jobs currently require one. The job categories that are growing fastest, moreover, don't generally require a college diploma, let alone a STEM degree. According to federal estimates, four of the five occupational categories projected to add the most jobs to the economy over the next five years are among the lowest-paying jobs: "food preparation and serving" (\$19,130 in average annual earnings), "personal care and service" (\$21,260), "sales and related" (\$25,360), and "health-care support" (\$26,440). And while the number of jobs that require a postsecondary education is expected to increase slightly faster than the number that don't, the latter group is expected to dominate the job market for decades to come. In October 2018 there were 1 million more job openings than job seekers in the U.S. Even if all of these unfilled jobs were in STEM professions at the top 10 percent of the pay scale, they would be little help to most of the 141 million Americans who are at the bottom 90 percent of the pay scale.....

All of which suggests that income inequality has exploded not because of our country's educational failings but despite its educational progress. Make no mistake: Education is an unalloyed good. We should advocate for more of it, so long as it's of high quality. But the longer we pretend that education is the answer to economic inequality, the harder it will be to escape our new Gilded Age.

*This column is abridged from the original because of space limitations.*

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Commentary by  
Tom Hylton



**MULTI-MILLIONAIRE Nick Hanauer, writing in *The Nation*, reached the conclusion that schools can't solve inequality in America.**