

Congressman Kennedy...
Expanding the Conversation on STEM

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Open a newspaper or turn on the TV today and you'll be hard pressed to ignore the steady drumbeat of an improving economy. Unemployment rates are at pre-recession levels. Private sector jobs are growing at the fastest pace since 1997. The number of Americans without health insurance has fallen by nearly 30 percent. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts we added over 60,000 jobs last year alone, pushing our unemployment rate down to 5.5 percent.

But this rosy picture is only half the story. Here's the other half: In Massachusetts, the unemployment rate is over 60 percent higher for black residents than for white and 110 percent higher for Hispanics. Just as alarming, the poverty rate for black families in our state is 144 percent higher than for their white neighbors and 273 percent higher for Hispanics.

These numbers reveal the ugly undercurrent to our economic recovery; we are leaving people behind. With this in mind, I joined the Latino STEM Alliance last month for a discussion about Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education. Around the table were business owners, vocational school educators, nursing professionals and other public officials who share my concern that we are building an economy that too many families in our country can't access.

Here's the way I see it. Across the country innovation industries are reorienting our economy around sectors like health care, advanced manufacturing, IT, clean energy and robotics. Over the next ten years, jobs in STEM-related fields are expected to grow by over 17 percent compared with just nine percent growth in other fields. That means that if we want to set up our kids for success in a modern economy, we need to ensure they have access to the education, training and skills that those jobs require. That's where STEM comes in.

The problem, however, is that federal and state STEM efforts to date have failed to reach three notable groups: women, minorities and low-income communities. Today only 26 percent of all STEM jobs in our country are held by women; 13 percent is held by Hispanics and African-Americans combined.

By 2020 there will be an estimated one million unfilled computer programming jobs. But in 2013 there were 11 states where not a single African-American student took the computer science AP test. The numbers weren't much better for Hispanic or female students.

This is a massive disconnect; a shortcoming that threatens to put these populations at an economic disadvantage for generations to come and keeps their potential on the sidelines at a time when our country needs it most.

We need to dramatically expand our efforts around STEM. Down in Washington, I've introduced a piece of legislation called the STEM Gateways Act, which would help direct federal resources to state and local STEM initiatives that specifically target women,

minorities and economically disadvantaged communities. As Congress debates several major updates to education policy in the weeks ahead, I will be working hard to push this key piece forward.

Our failure to set up all students for success in an increasingly technology-driven economy is not just limiting their futures. It's limiting our country's future as well.

From renewable energy to medical research to cybersecurity, there is no shortage of challenges facing us that can and will be addressed by the students sitting in our classrooms today. Each of those students, regardless of skin color, zip code or gender, should be given the chance to make an impact.