Imagine that the United States develops a comprehensive qualifications system with three levels or tiers.

At the top of this qualifications system, call it Tier III, are standards for individual jobs—jobs like that of a welder of specialty alloys, or dental assistant, or the operator of a machine that performs lithographic functions in the semiconductor fabrication business. The standards are set by individual firms for the way work is to be done in that firm—for example, the standards Boeing sets for the tolerances and failure rates in the construction of its new 777 airplanes.

At the next level of the qualifications system, Tier II, are skill standards for clusters of occupations requiring broadly similar skills. Because each of these groupings include many occupations—there might be a grouping, say, for manufacturing specialists, encompassing a great variety of types of manufacturing jobs—there might eventually be no more than thirty of these categories covering most of the front-line jobs in the nation. The actual standards for what one would have to know and be able to do in each category and how well one would have to be able to do it are defined by the requirements of high performance work-organizations, in which one is expected to think and to contribute a lot to the value and improvement of the product or service.

The third level, Tier I, encompasses a set of standards for what everyone in the society ought to know and be able to do to be successful at work, as a citizen, and as a family member. This tier incorporates standards calling for deep understanding of the core subjects in the curriculum as well as the capacity to apply that knowledge to complex real-world problems. And it incorporates the generic skills required to succeed in high-performance work environments, regardless of the particular job one is doing—skills such as problem-solving ability, the capacity to learn quickly, and the ability to work well with others in groups.