

Opening Statement of the Honorable John Boehner

Chairman, Committee on Education and the Workforce

Hearing on

"U.S. Immigration Policy and Its Impact on the American Economy"

November 16, 2005

Thank you all for coming. I welcome my colleagues on the Committee, and I look forward to hearing from each of our witnesses.

President Bush has announced his principles for immigration reform, and Congress is expected to act on corresponding legislation in the weeks and months to come. Many of these reforms concentrate on border security and other high-profile issues that have been covered prominently by the media and debated frequently on Capitol Hill. However, often overlooked is the impact on workers of current immigration policy and proposed immigration policy changes.

Indeed, two of the more important policy discussions taking place here in Washington focus on the need for reform of our nation's immigration laws and the need for a bold approach to keep our economy and our workforce competitive at the outset of the 21st Century. These two discussions happen to intersect in a very unique way right here at the Education and the Workforce Committee, and they are front-and-center at this hearing today.

For years, this Committee has focused on a 21st Century competitiveness agenda. From raising the bar in our public schools to ensuring that higher education is within reach of anyone with the desire to obtain it to strengthening and streamlining our job training and retraining programs, our Committee has been at the forefront with legislation designed to strengthen American competitiveness in a rapidly changing global economy. Today, we're going to view this same issue through a very different lens, and we've assembled a diverse panel of witnesses to join us in doing so.

The stage for today's hearing has been set by some very distinct trends - both in terms of immigration generally and its impact on the U.S. economy more specifically.

For example, the United States Census Bureau found that in 2004, 34 million of the nation's 288 million people - that's 12 percent of the U.S. population overall - were foreign born. This is the highest percentage in 70 years.

More specific to the American workforce, one of every seven people working in our nation last year was born elsewhere. That's more than 21 million workers. Just a decade ago, that number was closer to one in 10 workers.

As more of our workforce approaches the age of retirement, this trend will only continue and have an increasingly dramatic impact - both in the short-term and years down the road - on

worker wages, benefits, and opportunities. Today, our Committee will take its first step in the process of determining just what that impact could be and how Congress should respond.

It's no surprise to say that immigration - both legal and illegal - plays a significant role in our economy. In determining how best to address the issue, I strongly believe that efforts should focus on the causes of the problem - not merely the symptoms. I remain committed, and I trust that my Committee colleagues do as well, to addressing all aspects of the immigration issue in a responsible fashion. Whether this means through a comprehensive measure or an incremental effort, we must avoid disjointed attempts at reform.

Last week, the Congressional Budget Office released a timely study, "The Role of Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Market." This report analyzes the characteristics of the immigrant workforce, and its effect on U.S. wages and the economy. We are fortunate to have the Director of the CBO, the Honorable Douglas Holtz-Eakin, with us today to present the findings of this important study. The Director recently announced that he will be leaving CBO by the end of the year, and we thank him for his years of service.

So many congressional hearings have a very clearly-determined agenda even before they are gavelled to order. However, today we will have a hearing in the truest sense of the word. We will hear testimony from a philosophically diverse panel, who will share with us their unique perspectives during this information-gathering forum.

We are here to listen, to ask questions, and to learn just what the broad and complicated subject of U.S. immigration policy means to American workers, their families, and our nation's economy. Simply put, this issue is too important to leave to the law of unintended consequences, and that is why the testimony we are about to hear is so valuable.