



STATEMENT
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SEEKING A BIPARTISAN SWEET SPOT ON HIGH-SKILLED VISAS

This week, Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) introduced the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Visa Act of 2011, an omnibus package of provisions to overhaul the high-skilled visa system.

ImmigrationWorks USA president Tamar Jacoby made the following statement.

Sen. Bennet has issued a long-overdue challenge to his fellow senators: reform the high-tech visa system, eliminating the obstacles that make it all but impossible for American companies to recruit and retain the workers the nation needs to remain a globally competitive knowledge economy – or face the consequences. This is one area – not the only one, but one of the most critical – where partisan gridlock and stalemate are not an option. The Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Visa Act is a blueprint for what can be done – a compendium of good ideas, large and small, that will redefine the debate going forward.

The bill leaves virtually no corner of the high-tech visa system untouched. Among its most important mandates: new green cards for foreign students graduating from U.S. universities with STEM degrees, several ingenious steps to expand the number of green cards available to highly skilled workers, multiple good ideas for streamlining the skilled-visa process and a simplification of the EB-5 program that grants visas to foreign investors who create jobs in the U.S.

Sen. Bennet has tried to craft a package that will appeal to Democrats and Republicans, meeting the needs of employers, protecting U.S. workers, enhancing education for American STEM students even as it makes it easier to hire foreign workers and creating a program to grant student visas to unauthorized students enrolled full-time in certified university STEM programs.

This evenhanded outreach is critical. No measure can hope to pass without broad bipartisan support, and as several other bills introduced in recent weeks show, a growing number of Republicans are interested in stepping up to fix the legal immigration system. Not all provisions of the new compendium will be welcome to STEM employers or the foreign workers they so desperately need to continue innovating for America. But Sen. Bennet's package – and a similar bill introduced in June in the House by Rep. Zoe Lofgren – is a thoughtful and ambitious effort to find a legislative sweet spot.

Let the debate begin – the sooner the better. The Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Visa Act of 2011 is an excellent place to start.

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ImmigrationWorks USA is a national nonprofit organization building a grassroots business constituency in favor of immigration reform. The national network links major corporations, trade associations and 25 state-based coalitions of small to medium-sized employers working to advance better immigration law. Their common aim: legislation that brings America's annual legal intake of foreign workers more realistically into line with the country's labor needs.