Building Global Competitiveness

By Pam Goins

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The gap between how well states prepare and equip their work force and what is demanded in a highly dynamic, technologically advanced and globally structured 21st century economy is growing.

Yet while the gap exists and is recognized, there is neither clarity nor agreement on its nature or how to gauge its dynamics. How well a state prepares and equips its workers will determine its economic future.

"Today, the national discussion around students’ education has shifted from ensuring all students are academically proficient to ensuring all students are college and career ready," said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, "(It's) a big shift. Yet we know through a high school national dropout rate, through high college remediation rates and feedback from employers, that far too many students are not college and career ready."

Wise said states are working to change those realities.

Nationally, the Bureau of Labor Statics reports that, as of March 4, 2011, teenagers saw a nearly 24 percent unemployment rate. Overall, however, total numbers of jobs increased in manufacturing, construction, professional and business services, health care, and transportation and warehousing. Depending on the market, some people will have more difficulty finding a job, and others will have less difficulty. Regardless, employers have repeatedly said they are not acquiring the skilled work force needed to meet today's job demands, further highlighting the need for increased skill-building while students are being prepared for college and a career.

States lack high-quality measures to judge progress toward closing the achievement gap and state-level mechanisms to bring stakeholders together around those measures so they may address this challenge. Today's global economy has left the old geographic-based industrial structure behind. Skills and knowledge are now the most critical element driving economic competitiveness and growth.

Sara Watson, senior officer with the Pew Center on the States and director of Partnership for America’s Economic Success, notes the societal benefits of certain investments in young children—programs to support their early care and education, support for parents to help them effectively nurture children, and health care, among others—are increasingly clear. Intervention within the first five years of a child’s life plays an important role in creating the pattern for education
success, according to Watson. The National Center for Education Statistics reports the absence of deliberate intervention early in life leads to long-term damage, laying the foundation for later issues that eventually cost the individual and society.

“The Economic Value of the U.S. Early Childhood Sector,” a February 2011 report produced by the Partnership for America’s Economic Success, notes the direct cumulative impact of all expenditures—including early education and care, health care and family expenditures such as food, clothing, housing—on behalf of children have now on the nation’s economy is much less clear. Investing in young children equals nearly 3 percent of the gross domestic product, according to Elaine Weiss and Dr. Richard Brandon, authors of the report. Comparatively, agriculture spending is 1.2 percent and utility expenditures are 2 percent.

Yet, the allocations for the early childhood sector do not meet the needs of this young population who will grow to one day be the future work force. Policymakers can play a critical role when they invest in early childhood programs that lead to financial benefits later. Laying a solid foundation for early learning leads to higher earnings as an employee and saves taxpayers in education, crime and other social services costs.

Strategies to develop highly competent workers, beginning with the early years and continuing through postsecondary education, will be discussed during the interactive webinar as part of CSG’s Growth and Prosperity Virtual Summit of the States 2.0. Hear from Watson and others on how states can utilize early childhood education, K-12 and postsecondary education, including community colleges, to prepare individuals to succeed in a competitive global marketplace and become educated, technology-adept and highly productive world-class workers.

Increasing Global Competitiveness through Collaborative Education and Work Force Development Efforts will be the subject of a live webinar as part of CSG’s Growth and Prosperity Virtual Summit of the States 2.0. The free webinar will take place 1 p.m. EDT Wednesday, April 13.

CSG Resources

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Capitol Research: Community Colleges [7]
Capitol Research: Work Force Retraining [8]
Capitol Research: State Financing for Prekindergarten Education [9]
Stateline Midwest: Illinois Becomes First State to Require English Learner Services in Preschool [10]

Resources

Institute for a Competitive Workforce, “Starting Smart & Finishing Strong” [13]
Pew Center on the States, “The Case for Pre-K in Education Reform” [14]
Alliance for Excellent Education [15]

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