CSG Kicks Off State Pathways to Prosperity Initiative at Leadership Council Meeting

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WASHINGTON, D.C.—When CSG’s 2014 chairman Mark Norris talks about the State Pathways to Prosperity initiative, he says “it’s something like awakening the sleeping giant.”

Norris, the Tennessee Senate majority leader, spoke at The Council of State Governments 2014 Leadership Council meeting in June.

The initiative seeks to provide a policy and practice framework for states to better address workforce needs and to equip citizens with the skills, knowledge and qualifications needed for the 21st century global economy.

The initiative includes a national task force and four subcommittees focusing on child poverty, criminal justice, hunger and nutrition, and military and veterans’ concerns. Three of the subcommittees met during the meeting. CSG’s Justice Center presented a report related to criminal justice during the meeting.

Kermit Kaleba, executive director of the DC Workforce Investment Council, and Latrena Owens, deputy director of the University of the District of Columbia’s Center for Workforce Strategies, told committee members about the District’s commitment to tying workforce development strategies to economic development and the important role of postsecondary education in soliciting industry needs from employers and training individuals quickly.

Ron Painter, CEO of the National Association of Workforce Boards, provided a national perspective of the dynamic U.S. labor market and the need for equally flexible workforce development strategies.

He discussed the interlocking systems contributing to workforce development.

“Transportation has a key part in workforce development. Housing is a key component. K-12, early childhood education—these are massive systems in themselves, but they are also key to workforce development,” he said.

Painter’s point was reiterated by Steve Barkanic, senior vice president of the Business-Higher Education Forum. Barkanic talked about the alignment of postsecondary education with the economy and the exciting possibilities of emerging fields like cybersecurity.

“How do we leverage this work at the state level to encourage greater alignment between higher education and workforce?” Barkanic asked the attendees.
Bill Kamela, Microsoft’s policy counsel, pointed to the company’s difficulty in filling both entry-level positions and higher paying computer programming jobs requiring a computer science degree.

Julie Peller, director of federal policy at the Lumina Foundation, described the nontraditional pathways to postsecondary certificates and degrees. She also emphasized credentials that are stackable, meaning students can build on previous ones to advance their careers. She implored states to improve the quality of educational outcomes by linking them to state workforce systems.

Jason Williams, director of the nonprofit Stand for Children in Massachusetts, shifted the conversation to K-12 education and his organization’s goal of high quality public education for all children.

“Make high school graduation mean something,” he said.

Williams discussed rigorous academic standards and assessments that portrayed the need to broaden the workforce development conversation to include K-12 and early education.

Subcommittees met for the first time and were charged with identifying significant state policies and program opportunities that can support effective practices that address child poverty, hunger and nutrition, and military and veterans with the relationship to education and workforce development.

The military and veterans subcommittee set a goal of leveling the playing field for veterans and their families by eliminating barriers and increasing awareness of the challenges of reintegration into society after service through five policy buckets—advocacy and awareness, employment, health, higher education, and training and housing.

The Council of State Governments’ Justice Center highlighted two recent reports that could relate to workforce development—“Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement” and The “School Discipline Consensus Report.” The Justice Center also discussed the difficulties faced by adults with criminal records looking to re-enter the workforce.

Members of the child poverty subcommittee identified education, healthy families and economic policies—like tax credits and livable wages—as their three categories for policy recommendations.

The hunger and nutrition subcommittee noted three policy areas to serve as their priorities: benefit programs—like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Women, Infants and Children—education and food access. The subcommittee suggested reforms to benefit programs and school meals, as well as programs to offer instruction on nutritious meal preparation and to bring community voices to the table.

The national task force set four main benchmarks against which members will measure success. Those benchmarks are:

- By 2016, the task force will develop a communication plan to understand and share ideas regarding the current skills gap.
- By 2020, all students exiting high school will be prepared for a postsecondary pathway, including military enlistment, a two- or four-year degree or a career.
- By 2025, 60 percent of the workforce will have a postsecondary industry recognized credential, such as a degree or a certificate.
- Also by 2025, the domestic workforce development system will not only close the skills gap, but also will serve as a competitive advantage for the Unites States and its citizens as seen by a decrease in foreign workers.
To achieve these goals, the task force identified six areas to address: business and education alignment; engagement among all stakeholders, including communities, parents, industries and schools; infrastructure; training and education; using outcomes-based models to guide policy decisions and socioeconomic barriers.

Norris is confident in the task force and subcommittees.

“You are here not by accident but by design,” he told members in attendance. But he expects the work to be challenging and intensive. “With our support staff, we’ve spent about five months assembling and getting ready to move forward, and this is where the fun begins.”

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