ANCHORAGE, ALASKA—The UPS headquarters in Louisville, Ky., has found a way to attract good workers and connect those workers to higher education.

UPS/Metropolitan College covers the cost of tuition, books and academic bonuses to employees who work in the UPS overnight air operation while they’re attending school. The company partners with the University of Louisville, one of the largest universities in Kentucky, and the Jefferson County Community and Technical College to offer the program, Nick D’Andrea, director of state government affairs for UPS, told attendees at the Aug. 13 session, “Linking Education, Workforce Development for More Competitive States,” during the CSG National and CSG West Annual Conference.

The benefits to the students are obvious, but D’Andrea said UPS also has reaped rewards.

“Not only do we have to find a workforce, but we also have to retain them,” he said. “Our retention rate was deplorable.”

Before Metro College, UPS saw employees stay for the overnight shift an average of about eight weeks. That’s grown to 152 weeks. Students have come from 112 of Kentucky’s 120 counties, D’Andrea said.

“We stabilized the workforce and helped out students at the same time,” he said.

And that’s the key to linking workforce development and education. While the program may not be replicable in other states, D’Andrea said it offers this takeaway: “You’ve got to think outside the box to fix workforce development issues, to fix education issues.”

That’s what Tennessee has tried to do.

“What we have done in Tennessee … is something called (the) Complete College Tennessee Act in 2010 that has totally changed the way we do education in our state,” said Warren Nichols, vice chancellor of community colleges for the Tennessee Board of Regents.

Instead of giving funding to universities and other higher education institutions based on the number of students in class, the state now provides funding based on successful outcomes—the number of students who complete college.

“It’s not how many start,” said Nichols. “It’s about how many finish.”
“It’s all about every faculty member, every administrator, ... our sole goal is to find out what that student is looking for and what we can do to make that student successful,” he said. “At the end of the day, it is our job in higher education to make sure the students are successful and get what they came to do.”

To that end, Tennessee has enacted the Tennessee Promise that will offer free community or technical college to every student who graduates from a high school in the state beginning in the fall of 2015. In addition, all the credits earned by a graduate of a Tennessee community or technical college will transfer to a university in the state and those students will start as a junior.

Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris, the 2014 CSG national chair, has made workforce development and education the cornerstones of his “State Pathways to Prosperity” initiative. He has been behind much of the efforts in Tennessee to better link the two.

The state also adopted the Drive to 55, in which the governor and state legislators have set a goal to get a minimum of 55 percent of Tennesseans to have a certificate or degree by 2025 to fill the needs of the state workforce. The private sector and nonprofits also have joined in the effort.

A year ago, the state legislature adopted Norris’ bill that developed the Labor Education Alignment Program—or LEAP—in which higher education programs offered in a particular region will align with the needs of businesses in that region, Nichols said. That allows the current workforce to receive educational training that will benefit them in the communities in which they live.

“It’s terribly important what our state has done, and is doing, ... to make sure higher education, businesses and industries are working well together,” Nichols said. “We’re aligning supply with demand.”

Companies like 3M, based in St. Paul, Minn., strive to be a part of that collaboration, according to Dan Garry, issues management director. The company, which employs 35,000 of its 90,000 employees in the United States, is expecting to grow at a rate of 3 to 6 percent this year.

The company, he said, is looking at young people who can work in teams and have cross functional skills, like the ability to communicate and make presentations. Garry said 3M has several state-specific initiatives with educational institutions ranging from primary and middle schools, to high schools and universities, as well as vocational and technical schools and community colleges.

In Minnesota, for instance, 3M provides internships for students to work in its plants in a variety of manufacturing initiatives.

It partners with a program called Girls Start, an intensive year-round curriculum that shows girls from kindergarten through high school the many opportunities in science, technology, engineering and math—or STEM—fields.

3M also sponsors a summer bridge program in Georgia for underrepresented students interested in manufacturing.

These and other initiatives across the country, Garry said, “have been very, very important to us as we seek to grow the company in the U.S.”

Garry said the 3M CEO talks about the company’s fundamental strength—world-class talent.
“That’s one of the reasons we are so focused on building a high performance global workforce,” he said.