

Governor, educators, others delve into what we need to succeed

By Victoria Grabner

Originally published 08:28 p.m., March 21, 2009

Updated 08:28 p.m., March 21, 2009

Education their topic, they sat there on the Fine Arts Center stage: Three CEOs, two organizational presidents, the owner of a consulting firm, an executive director and one school principal.

Of those, Joseph W. Craft stood out. He runs a coal company which by the end of 2010 will provide an estimated 600 jobs in Union County.

And on Saturday, he also represented industry's reason to ask the question roughly 400 people also came to brainstorm and think about:

How do we improve education in western Kentucky so that all will benefit?

The answer? It will take all of us to find out.

III

"What Kentucky needs is groups of local leaders who demand high performance and who strive to bring that high performance about," Gov. Steve Beshear said at the Rally 4 Education Excellence.

For that, he had the right audience -- not only because he was talking to people who are aware that the dynamics of the working world have changed.

Most residents won't have one job for life anymore, he said. They will need continuous education and professional development, so that parents who lose their jobs are able to return to school, and students who are just beginning college know there are options for funding.

Saying the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 was the beginning of a transformation in state education, Beshear told the group that there was still much work to be done.

"KERA was never meant to be a one-time fix," he said. "It should meet the needs of our current society."

In doing so, Beshear said he would sign Senate Bill 1, which would dramatically redesign school accountability standards.

"This isn't just a tinkering around the edges, but a frank and bold" approach to the problem, he said. "Now is the time for another grassroots effort."

One way in which the state would change its focus is by helping students make a smooth transition from secondary school to college. In doing so, he said he is working to hold down rising tuition costs.

Also, Beshear said he has worked to make sure that more children have access to health insurance.

The goal is to create a highly skilled and highly educated workforce, he said.

He added that that is the only way that Kentucky can guarantee its competitiveness in the global world.

"All this effort fails without a strong local initiative," Beshear said.



III

So what are the problems, and how are they solved?

One telling point, said Helen Mountjoy, state Education and Workforce Development Cabinet secretary, is that unemployment in this region is high.

Gleaner reports show it was in the range of 9 to 12 percent in Henderson, Union and Webster counties, according to January figures.

That was a major reason why she said the roundtable discussion she moderated was not dealing with abstractions.

"We are talking about living, breathing" people, she said. "The things we need are different now than they were years ago ... We need a whole lot more from our business communities."

David Adkisson, CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

He said the level of income in Kentucky can only catch up if educational standards do so as well.

Craft, CEO of Alliance Resource Partners, added that a region's quality of education is important because it allows industries to recruit the best people to come work there.

"We have high expectations for our employees, and our employees have high expectations for their children," he said.

Robert Sexton, founding executive director of The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, said the next wave of reform has to focus on teacher quality.

But also at issue are how schools find teachers, how they place them in schools, how they evaluate them and how they compensate them.

Cheryl King, president of Kentucky Wesleyan University, said one reason today's students do not consider college is that their own parents have not graduated from high school. Adult literacy, she added later, is still a big problem in this country.

"They may not know how to navigate the higher education system," she said.

However, with an aging Baby Boomer population, Mountjoy said it is essential for the future workers of the United States to be prepared.

Meanwhile, Michele Reynolds, principal of McGuffey Sixth Grade Center in Lincoln County, Ky., said there is a real breakdown in what are considered essential skills throughout the state.

"The quality of instruction that is taking place in our classrooms is not where it needs to be," she said.

Reynolds added that students need teachers to infuse technology into their lessons. However, she said, oftentimes the students are more informed about technology than the educators are.

And, she'd like to see teachers move beyond solely lectures and tests. Reynolds said she'd like for more schools to teach students ways to work as a team, to problem solve, and to have a good work ethic.

"Those are going to be the most important things we need to teach," she said.

At the same time, Gary Keller, owner of Educational Solutions, a consulting firm, said he stresses rigor, relevance and relationships in education. That means the work should be challenging and useful to the

students, who should see their teachers as adults they can rely on.

Those are ways that schools -- and, importantly, parents -- can produce successful adults, he said.

Jerome Bowles, founding CEO of the Bowles Center for Diversity Outreach, agreed.

He said the first generation of integrated students in Kentucky did not feel they were accepted by others in the school system.

As a result, some older adults may have passed those impressions along to current minority students.

"If we start to look at students as future leaders, our expectations may change," Bowles said.

III

Meanwhile, the work continues. And ways to improve are many.

Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust in Washington, D.C., said some long-held views about why certain students or schools don't succeed don't make sense.

The hormones argument doesn't hold, since high school students in many other countries perform very well, for instance.

Some others may feel that poverty, a student's neighborhood or his or her lack of parents may be the reasons for poor academic performance, too.

But Haycock said some success stories prove those theories wrong. She pointed to a couple schools -- one in Atlanta, for instance -- with high percentages of minority and low-income students, adding that they are near or at the top of their states in performance on state tests.

What her study found is that schools succeed on the things they can do or change, not on the things they can't. That comes despite the views of some educators who have decided they can't do much to help students, she said.

She said some students in poor schools receive top grades for work that would earn "C's" in affluent schools. And in the nation, more classes in high-poverty, high-minority schools are taught by out-of-field or inexperienced teachers. "The results are devastating," Haycock's report said. "Kids who come in a little behind, leave a lot behind."

That's why she said schools should challenge all students, and they should make sure the best teachers are assigned to the students who need the most help.

"Quality education for all kids means educating them with the belief that they can learn, demanding their very best, but also providing the support they need to get there," Haycock said.



© 2006 The Evansville Courier Co.