



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Strong leadership will let Kentucky soar, not stagnate

Governor Beshear recently convened a group of business leaders, legislators, educators, and policy makers from across the southern region to study career and technical education. This group was convened under the support of the Southern Region Education Board (SREB) for which Governor Beshear is the chair in 2014. The group will complete its work with a report in late summer. I was excited to be a part of the group since KDE was also conducting a career and technical education study with the support of the Southern Region Education Board.

During a recent meeting, all of the southern region states made presentations about different aspects of career and technical education. We had presentations from national and international leaders. And we received numerous research reports that will inform our final recommendations. One of the reports comes from Anthony Carnevale, one of the most respected researchers in the field of education and workforce, at the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The report is titled "[A Decade Behind: Breaking Out of the Low-Skill Trap in the Southern Economy](#)." I want to share a few of the findings from the report since they will inform eventual recommendations not only for the SREB report but also for the Kentucky specific report.

Jobs will require more technical skills and training beyond high school. By 2020, 66 percent of jobs in the United States will require some postsecondary training. In the Southern Region, the projection is 59 percent and in Kentucky, 54 percent. Unless we do something different, in the south and in Kentucky, we will not have as many well-paying jobs as other states and that will have an impact on our region's and our state's economy.

There is a low-wage and low-skill equilibrium in the south and in Kentucky. Supply and demand for skill are balanced with low education and low wage levels. In recent days, this has been exactly the conversation that the Saving Our Appalachian Region ([SOAR](#)) initiative has been having in Eastern Kentucky.

How do you break out of the low-wage and low-skill equilibrium? There are two strategies to do this and both strategies must work closely together and develop simultaneously. We can produce more high-skill talent through postsecondary training and we must modernize existing industries and attract new industries that have high-skill and high-wage jobs.

What happens if one comes before the other? If you have more postsecondary talent and few high-skill and high-wage jobs, then you will have a brain drain to other states where the jobs exist. If you have the high-skill and high-wage jobs but the workforce is low-skill, then the business will import talent from other states. This is exactly the pattern that we have seen first with Toyota and in more recent days with General Electric and Ford. Importing talent from other states may help the economy, however, it does not help Kentucky workers land higher paying jobs.

Governor Beshear understands the issues and I feel certain that our General Assembly also understands that the recruitment of high-skill and high-wage jobs requires an equal push to develop a highly skilled workforce. A highly skilled workforce comes through investment in education from early childhood through postsecondary attainment.

I am excited that Governor Beshear's budget is focused on the competitiveness of Kentucky and his budget priorities are evidenced in his focus on early childhood and K-12 education and economic development (from cradle to career). However, there remains much work to do with investment in postsecondary education and training.

I encourage our lawmakers to look for additional revenue sources to invest in postsecondary education and training.

There are those that will say the time is not right. There are those that will say we must cut in order to live within our means and we cannot raise revenue. However, the message from all of the research, reports, and practical experience of business leaders and policy makers is that we should not be swayed by the false dichotomy of investment versus no revenue.

The long term benefits of investment in education and training will greatly outweigh the short term push back on expanding revenue sources. Kentucky can lead or watch other states soar beyond us. Difficult times require strong leaders who can make tough decisions. Governor Beshear exhibited his strong leadership this week. Now it is up to the General Assembly.

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