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Projects are aligned for success in school and then work too

Posted Friday, July 13, 2007

It's an exciting time for education reform in Delaware and across the nation. The planets are aligned. The energy is palpable as organizations such as the National Governors Association, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and our own Vision 2015 have stepped forward to improve schools.

Influential people and organizations are coming together to address a problem that threatens the future of our nation: American high schools have not adequately prepared young people for success in college, work and life. The United States has one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the industrialized world. Nearly one million students drop out of school every year in this country, and almost half of all African-Americans, Hispanics and native Americans fail to graduate.

In Delaware, 1,995 students dropped out of high school during the 2005-2006 school year. Many of those who do graduate are not prepared for college or work, both of which now require the same level of skills and knowledge. More than half of college professors (54 percent), and three-fifths of employers (58 percent) state that high school graduates do not possess skills necessary for college or work.

These alarming statistics have far-reaching consequences for these individuals as well as the country's economic and civic health. For roughly 67 percent of the jobs in today's labor market, at least some postsecondary education is needed, and that is expected to increase in the years ahead.

Businesses are looking for employees who can write and communicate clearly, analyze information, conduct research and solve complex problems. If American workers cannot meet the demand, highly skilled jobs will go to other countries -- which will diminish our competitiveness and affect the living standards of millions of citizens.

Failure to adapt

Bill Gates, chairman of the Microsoft Corporation and co-chairman of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, testified before Congress in March about the failure of American high schools to adapt to an economy now based on knowledge and technology, rather than manufacturing and agriculture. He applauded the governors of 30 states (including Delaware) who have raised math and literacy standards.

The Gates Foundation has invested more than \$1.5 billion in the creation of high-performing schools and systems, supporting more than 1,800 schools nationwide. Delaware was fortunate to receive \$2 million of this funding, through the National Governors Association's Honor States Program.

Many other organizations are supporting high school reform. The Southern Regional Education Board, Go Alliance, Pathways to College Network, Achieve and American Diploma Project are working together to revitalize American high schools. Delaware has pulled its own leaders in education, government and business together through the Vision 2015 initiative and the P-20 Council. Vision 2015 is devoted to securing a high-quality education for every child in the state by 2015, while P-20 coordinates efforts from pre-school through graduate school.

These initiatives have been important to the work of the Delaware Department of Education, and I am pleased to report that many years of planning and effort are now coming to fruition. The state's Reaching Higher for Student Success collaboration is designed to ensure that Delaware students graduate prepared for college, work and citizenship. Highlights include:

New graduation requirements approved by the State Board of education to align with the entrance requirements of the state's two public universities, including comprehensive English language arts curriculum and four years of mathematics.

Student Success Plans for all eighth- and ninth-graders beginning in the 2007-08 school year, with each student connected to an adviser who can provide one-on-one help with college and career options and make good curriculum choices to achieve students' goals.

Expanded Advanced Placement course offerings will enable students to maximize high school learning and accrue college credits without paying college tuition.

Improved career and technical education is aligned to industry-recognized certifications.

Free college tuition is available through the SEED (Student Excellence Equals Degree) scholarship program for an associate's degree at Delaware Technical & Community College or the University of Delaware's associate of arts degree program.

I am also excited to announce the launch of the Education Department's "Yes You Can!" campaign. Developed with students, parents, teachers, college professors and employers, this campaign has an interactive Web site, posters and other engaging tools to motivate and assist students as they plan for work or college. Our goal is to give students encouragement and resources to think about their future and go for it. There's a world of opportunity out there and we're here to help them explore it.

Parents, employers, educators and citizens' involvement are critical. Please join us as we work to prepare every student for a successful future. Visit www.yesyoucande.com. Or send us an e-mail with your ideas to: dedoe@doe.k12.de.us.

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