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Now is the time to debate education in Del.

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Here's an interesting fact: Polls show that Americans -- jolted by a falling stock market and the subprime credit crisis -- are now more worried about the economy than the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While we may be focused on our short-term bottom lines, it's a good time to put education back into the equation.

We all know the story.

In key areas, such as computer science and biotech, American colleges and universities are drawing students from abroad. Many of those students are going back to their home once they graduate, helping fuel the economic booms in places like China and India.

While making the global economy stronger ultimately makes the world a safer place, we need to start thinking about the effect those changes have on us -- and we have to start doing something about it because, as the old saying goes, "You can't run an economy selling hamburgers to each other."

Sadly, the connection between education and the economy hasn't reached the questions being posed of our candidates for president -- let alone our statewide or legislative candidates.

For the seeming endless series of debates before the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary, the national media didn't get around to asking about education until the Democratic debate in Philadelphia -- the 14th debate of the year.

The question was left to the debate's "Lighting Round," shortly ahead of Congressman Dennis Kucinich being asked about whether he had an encounter with a UFO.

Education deserves better. It should be the subject of a debate unto itself. It's too important to our future for anything less.

While education may be getting the short shrift on the presidential stage, we in Delaware are lucky.

That's because we've been working on education for more than a decade -- well ahead of No Child Left Behind. We've been looking at education and working to improve the ability of our most important resources, our young people, to compete in the marketplace of today and, more importantly, to learn so they can stay competitive as the marketplace changes around them.

As chairman of the Senate Education Committee, I've watched as our test scores have steadily risen in areas such as math and reading. For example, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, our reading scores have climbed from a below-the-national-average scores of 213 for fourth-graders in 1992 and 254 in 1998 to above average scores of 225 for fourth- graders and 265 for eighth- graders last year.

In math, we've made equally steady progress, climbing from respective fourth- and eighth- grade scores of 218 and 242 in 1992, both below the national average, to above average scores of 263 for fourth-graders and 283 for our eighth-graders in 2007.

The scores are significant because the assessment is viewed as the nation's report card for schools, judging our

educational programs on an apples-to-apples basis.

That kind of success makes me incredibly proud to be a Delawarean.

Even now, with the leadership of the Rodel Foundation and its Vision 2015 project, Delaware is looking to the best examples from around the country to make its students better lifelong learners.

But success here isn't enough, and as Americans we need to push for more.

We must look regionally and nationally to improve areas, such as developing standards that help our students build on their strengths and shore up their weaknesses. I plan to work on legislation that will do that here.

We also need to help our teachers stay ahead of the curve.

We need to reward the teachers taking on the toughest challenges and provide incentives for all teachers who are delivering stellar results. We also need to make sure that schools are providing students who need extra time and help the resources they need. Delaware already has started down those roads, but we must elevate the debate. We need to press candidates from president, to governor of Delaware to State House and Senate for their ideas. But first, we must educate ourselves and arm ourselves with the right questions to ask.

Two good starting places are our own Vision 2015, which you can visit at www.vision2015delaware.org, to learn what's going on locally.

You also can visit a group called EDin08, a nonpartisan group supported by the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli and Edith Broad Foundation, that's driving to put education at the top of the national agenda. Its Web site is www.EDin08.com.

With a presidential primary coming up on Feb. 5 and state elections later this year, now is the time to join the debate.

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