

Improving public education in S.C. would spawn economic development

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BY JON BUTZON

The Post and Courier recently published a report ("Better jobs in S.C. focus of forum") concerning a forum held in Charleston to discuss economic development and bringing better jobs to the area.

The article was subtitled "Change viewed as crucial for Charleston, state." So, it was surprising that in all of the issues and needed changes mentioned in the article, public education was not included. The most crucial change of all -- a change to a world-class system of public education -- wasn't on the agenda.

Soaring energy costs, a renewed emphasis on marketing the state, incentives to encourage existing employers to invest and add jobs, measures to create a friendlier business climate with government restructuring at the top of the list, funding for roads and other infrastructure, support for the Ports Authority, and tort reform were some of the topics receiving attention. But the improvement of public education was not among them.

The article's author told me that the fact that 50 percent of our students in South Carolina quit school before graduation did receive brief mention from one speaker. But the reporter further acknowledged that public education certainly was not a significant theme of the meeting. Maybe that is why neither public education nor anyone advocating its improvement was represented on the panel.

How in the world can anyone talk about the economic well-being of this state and not talk about public education and its improvement?

How can anyone have a serious discussion about providing a viable work force for high skill, high-paying jobs without talking about markedly improved public education?

How can anyone seriously think we can convince potential employers that we are committed to their success in our state if we cannot demonstrate that we are equally committed to the success of all of our children?

The answer to these and a host of other questions just like them is "we can't."

The economic development strategy for this community and state is building a high-quality, reliable system of public education that makes every child a real economic asset.

The revenue enhancement strategy for this community and state is building a system of public education that ensures that far more than just half of students are educated to a level where they earn enough money to pay taxes and can carry their own weight. In South Carolina, persons earning at the level of the average high school dropout pay almost no income taxes. Revenue to the state from this sector of the population amounts to less than 10 percent of income taxes collected.

Moreover, our high school dropouts are much more likely to be on welfare or in prison or an economic drain in some other way than are our high school graduates. Not only are these folks not contributing to, they are taking away from the economy of the state.

The strategy for bringing new business to South Carolina is to build a system of public education second to none; a system that reliably and dependably educates every one of South Carolina's children and the children that potential employers bring with them. Don't South Carolina's employers and parents deserve the best system of public education in America? I am quite certain that our children do.

Top-notch public education is our best economic viability, survivability and development strategy. Period. Under-funding or trying to save money on public education is a fool's strategy. It is short-sighted and it paints us into a corner. And we already know where you can go from a corner: nowhere.

No discussion or plan or program related to economic development is worth a plug nickel if it does not include a significant focus on, strategies for, and a commitment to, the quantum improvement of public education for every child. Unless and until we realize that, we are kidding ourselves.

The economic potential of this state and our community is huge. But, until we commit as a state to get public education right, South Carolina will remain the greatest state that might have been.