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Let's commit to making our educational system the best it can be

By James DeBord

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In the late 1990s, I was working on a major school reform initiative on behalf of a group of the largest businesses in the Philadelphia region. The program was part of the nationwide Annenberg Challenge initiative. One of the most memorable moments I had during that time was when I met with the CEO of one of the top banks in the country to write testimony for him prior to his appearance before the State Board of Education.

I began our conversation by asking him what he thought was the single biggest challenge confronting businesses in Pennsylvania.

He began by telling me how it was pretty standard fare for businesses to complain about taxes and regulation. He told me that, in his opinion, that's what most businesses and their lobbyists are trained to do.

But then he said he felt those two issues weren't even close to being the top challenges for businesses if they were interested in long-term success. He told me their greatest challenge was helping to ensure a quality educational system from which they would draw their future employees.

I wasn't surprised he had told me a quality education system was the No. 1 issue for ensuring long-term business success; he was going to speak before the State Board of Education after all.

But what he told me next brought it home to me in an incredibly powerful way. He said across the bank's Mid-Atlantic region, it received more than 50,000 applications for entry-level employment every year. Of those 50,000 applications, more than 60 percent could not demonstrate eighth-grade level computation skills, which were considered a minimum requirement for employment.

Twelve years later, I still am stunned when I think about that moment.

For the past five years, in my role as director of quality-of-life improvement initiative at YorkCounts, I have been working on education issues among many other broad-based efforts in regional public safety and planning programs; economic development and community health.

YorkCounts recognizes that within York County and across Central Pennsylvania there are many school districts doing a great job educating their students. But it also is no secret there are many districts struggling to provide a quality education to young people within their communities, and there are very few that are not struggling with their finances at the moment. As a result, I wonder just how many more future job applicants here in Central Pennsylvania will not be able to demonstrate eighth-grade math

skills or be able to read or write at a level that will allow them to be gainfully employed.

YorkCounts understands school districts, students, parents, educators, businesses and local taxpayers often struggle to figure out ways to improve educational outcomes while operating within the confines of communal and economic challenges. That is why YorkCounts has been working on major education-related programs, such as our Stay In School initiative in which we partnered with the York County United Way. This program is designed to deal with at-risk youth from the time before they enter our school systems to the day they graduate.

We also have launched the first-ever regional public charter school in Central Pennsylvania with a world-class International Baccalaureate curriculum. In addition, YorkCounts has partnered with the York County Economic Development Corp. to create an Office of Workforce Development with a special emphasis to provide educational programs for those who have been chronically unemployed or underemployed over the years.

Much more remains to be done. YorkCounts recently held our second countywide education summit in the past five years. At this important event, local school board members, superintendents, civic activists, national education experts, business leaders and a number of state legislators came together to talk about challenges facing our schools.

But now it is time to move past the talk and to insist everyone get serious about improving our educational system for all of our students here in this great state no matter where they might live or attend school. Our future economy is counting on it!

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