

ENSURING FUNDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EDUCATION AND WORK FORCE DEVELOPMENT

South Carolina Chamber of Commerce
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Objective

To foster a commitment to develop a highly skilled, well-educated population who will have more opportunities, more job choices, and more security with prosperous companies in South Carolina. A partnership of action and cooperation between the public and private sectors is needed to ensure accountability and success.

Background

The business community has expressed concerns that many students coming out of South Carolina public schools are not ready to meet the employment demands of an increasingly knowledge-based private sector. Furthermore, many children in elementary schools are not as proficient in the math and reading skills of their grade level as their peers nationwide, a pattern that continues into high school and beyond.

The South Carolina General Assembly has passed legislation establishing a two-year pilot four-year-old kindergarten program to be offered in school districts and through private providers like First Steps. Enabling two agencies to administer a single program is counterproductive and not the best use of resources. A single administrator of 4K programs would achieve stronger partnerships between the public and private sectors, use dollars allocated to the program more efficiently, and realize better results for our students.

Unfortunately, the disconnect between quality education and quality work force continues to grow. The South Carolina General Assembly passed the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA), now called Personal Pathways to Success, in 2005 and approved needed implementation funding in 2006 and 2007. The primary goals of Personal Pathways are to increase high school completion rates (some of the lowest in the nation), better prepare students for work and college, increase parental involvement, and increase options for students at risk of dropping out of school. The program creates individual graduation plans, tailored to specific career clusters, for all students. It also encourages parental involvement and support. More guidance counselors in public schools - one per every 300 students - serve as a vital component of the program. Thus far close to 90 percent of new counselor slots in schools across the state have been filled. In addition, eight Regional Education Centers, designed to partner education and business, have been added in various areas of South Carolina.

Situation

As South Carolina's children mature, Personal Pathways allows electives and classes to be tailored to each student's career interests. Employers believe it gives students leverage to become better educated in fields that best suit their interests, ultimately decreasing the drop-out rate, improving a student's chance for economic prosperity, and increasing competitiveness for existing and new business. Personal Pathways defines at-risk students and outlines criteria for school districts to use in the identification of students at-risk for dropping out and includes evidence-based model programs to be implemented to ensure that they have the strongest opportunity to graduate.

Developing a knowledgeable and skilled work force is key to increasing South Carolina's per capita income. Reducing the dropout rates will result in lower governmental or institutional costs and a higher quality of life for citizens. Simply stated if students can translate the applicability of what they are learning into more

earning potential and a better quality of life, then more students will buy into South Carolina's educational system and prosper. It is a win-win situation for students and their future employers.

At the same time, adult literacy in South Carolina continues to present enormous challenges. Often those who lack reading skills are parents raising children and attempting to prepare them for future careers. Programs addressing adult literacy must be enhanced and readily accessible to citizens in all 46 counties in South Carolina.

Funding inequities among school districts in South Carolina continue to widen. Fair and reasonable funding for all schools with accountability is an investment in South Carolina's future. Only when all students in South Carolina have an equal chance to thrive will the disparity in skill levels be improved.

As educational strides are achieved with each new year, great challenges remain. The state's high dropout rate remains steady, and the mismatch between preparation and work force needs continues. The skill levels of many graduates do not meet work force standards, and job candidates continue to lack "soft skills," such as integrity and team commitment. Support for students, from the time they enter educational programs until the time they graduate from a post-secondary institution, is critical to increasing the state's per capita income.

As we continue to strive to make South Carolina as attractive as possible to global industry, we must remember that, without skilled and well-educated citizens, we will never compete fully in the world-wide economy.

S.C. Chamber Position

The South Carolina Chamber of Commerce believes that the state must be committed to developing a highly skilled, well-educated population who will have more opportunities, more job choices, and more security with prosperous companies in South Carolina in order to increase productivity and per capita income for all South Carolinians. A partnership of action and cooperation between the public and private sectors is needed to ensure accountability and success. The South Carolina Chamber supports:

- Full funding to support Personal Pathways to Success and related accountability measures including required new funding for the dropout prevention component;
- Full funding for the development of the SC Technical College Systems' Accelerated Job Readiness Programs -competeSC which includes QuickJobs Carolina (Industry-wide Work force Training) and Retool Carolina (upgrading Work force Training for Existing Business);
- Funding and implementing a statewide WorkKeys® initiative at educational institutions, including high schools, designed to ensure that students achieve the "soft skills" that business leaders say are key to a quality work force;
- Expanding apprenticeships statewide;
- Funding for allied health initiatives at educational institutions;
- Expanding the piloted 4-K program statewide with a single efficient administration; and,
- Developing a comprehensive long-term plan to address work force development issues.