

For State to Prosper, Education Must Adapt

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The quality of Connecticut's education system and its workforce have long been among its most important strategic advantages. But Connecticut is at risk of losing its advantage, as other states and countries are more effectively dealing with the demands of a global, knowledge-based economy. If we are to maintain our state's competitiveness and vitality, our education system must measure up.

As of 2003, one of every four workers was employed in a job category that didn't even exist 40 years ago, according to a report this summer by President Barack Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. That number has undoubtedly increased in six years and highlights the convergence between education and the fast-changing economy. If we are to keep pace, much of the burden — and opportunity — rests with our schools. We need to train today's students for tomorrow's jobs.

From preschool to high school and to our public universities, Connecticut must demand more for its investment in education by strengthening the curriculum and graduation requirements for all students — making certain they enter the workforce with the professional and technical skills they need.

There are a lot of good things happening in our education system, including more rigorous admission standards recently approved by the Connecticut State University System board of trustees, which require more extensive course work in disciplines including science, writing, mathematics and world language.

Central, Eastern, Southern and Western Connecticut state universities are meeting the priorities of employers by adding programs in high-demand fields such as engineering. They are also working with local school districts to reduce the number of students requiring remedial courses.

Connecticut's university system plays a critical role in our future workforce. More of its graduates stay in Connecticut and these universities, especially Southern and Central, produce many of the teachers who will educate and prepare the next generation.

The business community is committed to helping improve students' academic performance in high school and preparing them for college and careers. The Connecticut Business and Industry Association's Project Opening Doors, a partnership between the public and private sectors, is increasing state high school students' participation and

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achievement in Advanced Placement courses for college. Now entering its second year, the program has had great success, especially among underrepresented students, raising their AP enrollment and test scores.

Our experiences show that students exposed to great schools, dedicated teachers, and encouragement and support can master a rigorous curriculum and succeed. The state Department of Economic and Community Development's recently completed Connecticut Economic Strategic Plan found that "the state's changing demographics will place increasing demands on the system to provide educational opportunities." The achievement gap between our high-performing schools and those that serve predominantly low-income and minority students must be eliminated.

That's why programs like Project Opening Doors and Hartford's Academy of Engineering and Green Technology, which offers academic and career training in engineering, environmental science and advanced manufacturing to the city's high school students, are so important. These programs prepare students with the professional and technical

skills to successfully meet the labor needs of the future.

Connecticut must strengthen its education system to anticipate and respond to employers' needs while emphasizing lifelong learning. That means more collaboration, greater coordination, better aligned curriculum and stronger awareness of the expectations of each level of education. It means parents, teachers and communities, businesses and nonprofits, every segment of our society coming together to ensure our progress.

It also means making postsecondary education an expectation for more of our young people, regardless of where they live or their family's income. Only then can we truly ensure today's youth a secure future, no matter which of the yet-to-be-invented jobs they may find themselves doing.

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*This article was published
on October 23, 2009*

Hartford  **Courant.**



Connecticut State University System

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