



Quincy business professionals stress high-quality early education

By Jasmine Brown, QuincyJournal

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A news conference was held Thursday morning in Blessing Hospital's Administrative Board Room revealing a new report, released by members of Quincy's business community and America's Edge, that states only 4 out of 10 "working-age Illinois adults" have an associate's degree or higher.

Quincy members of America's Edge present at the news conference included Brad Billings, President and CEO of Blessing Health System; Dr. Robert Gervasi, President of Quincy University; Brian Hendrian, Quincy market President of Bank of Springfield; and JoEllen Randall, Vice President of Human Resources at Blessing Health System. America's Edge was represented by the Illinois State Director, Tim Carpenter.

The group and members of America's Edge emphasized the importance of investing in "high-quality early learning programs." These programs are expected to reach a long-term goal to meet the education demands of future jobs in Illinois.

"To insure our long-term economic security, we need an infrastructure solution. That's what early education can do for our education system and our economy. It can create a pipeline of skilled workers that businesses know they will need," said Tim Carpenter.

The goal is to get the attention of legislators and show the importance of closing the skills gap that has hindered businesses nationwide due to the lack of skilled workers that qualify for jobs.

"We are asking Illinois policy makers to prioritize and protect high quality early care and education programs, even in these difficult budget times," said Carpenter.

Job growth continues to emphasize the importance of a required minimum of a bachelor's degree for high-skilled jobs and for medium-skilled jobs, where education outside of high school is expected.

Many jobs go unfilled because employers cannot find applicants who have the skills to fill them. This problem is projected to get worse over the next decade.

By 2018, it is expected that more than a high school education will be required in 6 out of 10 jobs in Illinois. Many of the fast growing jobs in Illinois will require a STEM education, including knowledge in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

In Adams County, it is projected that the shortage of healthcare-related workers will reach 40 percent over the next 10 years.

"I have been in the health care industry for over 35 years. The supply of healthcare professionals continues to be less than the demand. The more children you can get engaged in an early stage...chances are they will go on to college and move into those

skilled positions and eventually enter into the workforce," said Randall.

An importance in "soft" skills will also increase, including communication, collaboration and critical thinking. This will be due to global competition and the fast pace changes in the business environment. Studies show that high-quality early education helps to improve these "soft" skills.

"We need to be preparing kids for the future. I think the research is pretty clear that quality early childhood education can really get kids started on that right path where they will be able to have a lot more options to choose from," said Carpenter.

According to Carpenter, in the last 2 years Adams County has suffered a loss of 14 preschool classrooms due to reductions in funding. These cuts have limited progress and have pushed Quincy back to the level of education that was present in 2001. Cutting such programs has slowed the growth of businesses and the workforce, not only in Quincy, but in the state of Illinois.

"As we recruit individuals to the Quincy area, one of the first things that individuals will look at is what are the educational

systems available here for my children," said Randall.

"One out of five high school students in Illinois do not graduate on time," said Dr. Gervasi.

According to Hendrian, a strong start in education will improve the success of students academically in the future. Hendrian gave an example of the ability to graduate 10 thousand more high school graduates than the current number. The ability to do so could mean the support of 1,000 new jobs in the state, boosting the economy and bringing in more income for these future employees.

"I see it from the whole scope; from being involved with our own center to how important it is as we recruit professionals to the Quincy area, to also the retention...It not only benefits the children, it benefits the community and it actually benefits the whole state of Illinois," said Randall.

America's Edge is a non-profit business leader organization that has 100 members in Illinois out of 700 nation-wide. This organization supports investment in children and youth, and the members are the foreground, looking to strengthen business and the economy.