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Guest Opinion

Jobs will be hard to fill in N.C. if we stay on this path

Thad Woodard

If current education and labor market trends continue, North Carolina could face a shortage of 46,000 workers. These numbers are not good for our state's economic growth and long-term security.

According to a just-released report from the business leaders group, America's Edge, jobs of the future will demand much higher numbers of individuals with an associate's degree or higher. However, only 38 percent of working-age adults in our state have that level of educational attainment. Jobs requiring post-secondary education are expected to grow 65 percent faster than jobs for high school dropouts. Over 90 percent of jobs in high demand occupations like engineering and science will require some level of post-secondary education

Beyond occupation-specific skills and education requirements is a lack of "soft skills" – communications, collaboration, and critical thinking. Just last year, 60 percent of surveyed North Carolina employers reported a lack of communications skills among job applicants, and close to half reported deficiencies in critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

The jobs of the future will be hard to fill when 22 percent of our high school students do not graduate on time. But the problems begin before high school. In our state, 63 percent of eighth graders are below grade level in math and 66 percent of our fourth graders read below grade level.

The good news is that evidenced-based approaches will help children and youth develop the critical skills needed in today's and tomorrow's workforce: high-quality early learning programs and innovative high school education models.

Extensive research demonstrates that high-quality early learning will prepare our children for kindergarten and beyond. The years between birth and five are critical for a child's academic, social, and emotional development. Children in high-quality early learning programs are more likely to graduate high school, attend and complete college, and earn more as adults.

Even better, we do not need to wait 20 years to enjoy the economic benefits from investments in early learning. According to the *America's Edge* report, every \$1 invested in early learning in the state generates a total \$1.91 in sales of local goods and services. The return on investment outpaces other sectors of North Carolina's economy like retail trade, manufacturing, and construction.

I am glad Governor McCrory believes high-quality early learning should be a priority by proposing increased funding for the North Carolina high-quality pre-k program. More four-year-olds would be served and prepared to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. We need to ensure that our state's high-quality programs for all of our youngest children, which include children from birth to age five, are strengthened so we can better ensure North Carolina children are college- and career-ready.

However, laying a strong foundation for success in school and beyond is only the first step. We must also address the immediacy of our “skills gap.” We can do this through high school education models that bring career relevance into the classroom and help students develop the increasingly important skills of communication, collaboration and critical thinking.

Education must be relevant so students understand how what they are learning in school will apply later in life. Innovative education approaches – some already in our high schools in North Carolina – provide students with work-based and project-based learning opportunities, which help students understand what will be expected of them in the work world and develop the ability to work as a team. These models also target students’ communications skills, both oral and written. Students “learn to learn” – an invaluable skill in our constantly evolving, technology driven economy. Schools with these models are showing impressive results, with significantly increased graduation rates, proficiency in subjects like math, reading, and science, and enrollment in post-secondary education and training.

To help alleviate our skills gap, I urge our state policy-makers to find ways to support partnerships between business and our schools so that North Carolina students have access to these types of education models, including incentivizing businesses to provide workplace learning opportunities, such as internships, so that kids have more opportunities to find real world relevance through their work in the classroom.

Our education system is a continuum that begins with the strong foundation of quality early learning and continues through our K-12 system and beyond to our community colleges and universities.

Let us invest in what works.

Thad Woodard is the President/CEO of North Carolina Bankers Association.