

WestLinn Tidings

Today's skills gap threatens tomorrow's economy

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Many children heading back to school this month are on a path that will leave them ill-prepared for success in the workforce. Why? Because there is a serious gap between the skills being acquired by our

state's high school graduates and those now required for the jobs that will drive Oregon's economy forward.

A report by the business leaders group America's Edge states that only 29 percent of Oregon's 2012 graduates who took the ACT met college readiness benchmarks in all four core areas tested: English, math, reading and science. Yet Oregon jobs that require post-secondary education are expected to grow 40 percent faster than jobs for high school dropouts and graduates.

In the fast-growing jobs in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), 94 percent of Oregon jobs will require post-secondary education by 2018.

The problems become evident as students struggle with basic skills in the early grades and worsen significantly as coursework becomes more challenging. In Oregon, only 33 percent of eighth-graders are proficient in math and reading and only 35 percent are proficient in science. As a result, 32 percent of Oregon high school freshmen do not graduate within four years.

Something needs to change. The first solution is to keep implementation of Oregon's Common Core State Standards (CCSS) on track. Led by the nation's governors and chief state school officers and developed by subject matter experts, these standards have been voluntarily adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. They do not prescribe a specific curriculum or tell teachers

how to teach, but they do establish universal content and skills that students need to learn at each grade level in preparation for the next.

The standards also reflect businesses' needs for a highly skilled workforce that has mastered core academic content and is able to think critically, communicate effectively and solve complex problems. Just as importantly, the standards are internationally benchmarked, preparing our students to compete successfully in a global economy.

We can also support student success by replicating high school models that incorporate work-based and project-based learning. These models drive academic achievement while instilling skills that are directly applicable to current and future jobs. This is particularly true for schools that focus on STEM.

Nationwide, students who participate in these career academy models are twice as likely to work in the computer, engineering or media technology sector eight years after graduation, thus increasing the supply of workers for STEM jobs. That's good news for Oregon because these jobs are expected to grow by 13 percent between 2008 and 2018.

Implementation of the CCSS and infusing academics with real-world experience are not a panacea for a multitude of issues that keep students from meeting their potential. But investing in both approaches will boost student engagement and achievement, supporting kids today and building a better workforce in the years to come.

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