

Business Group likes Common Core Standards

By SARAH ARNEY
Staff Reporter

Business leaders discussed the statewide “skills gap” in Olympia last week.

Local teachers and administrators should be happy to hear that the group, America’s Edge, sees the state’s new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as part of the solution.

But that’s not all it will take to get the state’s youth educated and trained adequately for the jobs of the future.

The CCSS, which were developed by the nation’s governors and chief state school officers and adopted by Washington state in 2011, will produce long-term, sustainable economic growth as our students become more prepared for college or career, according to Steve Leahy, a member of America’s Edge who contributed to a study, “Ensuring Washington State’s Global Success.”

Career academies proposed to solve skills gap

“Of course, higher standards are always a good idea,” Leahy said.

But he said, the study shows that Washington businesses need workers with both knowledge and skills.

Along with the common core standards, the business leaders proposed an innovative high school model —career academies — as a proven method in reversing the skills gap.

While Leahy was not familiar with Stanwood’s FAA programs that incorporates academic studies with hands-on skills through assistance from professional mentors in the community, he agreed, that’s the strategy the business leaders are proposing.

He mentioned the Career and Technical Institute at Skagit Valley College as a good example of career academy programs.

“The major difference in today’s approach, compared to “yester-year,” is that career-related education is now for all kids, not just the non-academic types,” Leahy said.

Speakers at the meeting included Brad Jurkovich, of Fisher-Jurkovich Public Affairs, Kathy Lombardo, independent consultant and former senior vice president of CH2M Hill Engineering and Kris Johnson, AWB president.

The report notes that only 43 percent of working-age adults in the state have the necessary level of education and training to work in the modern world and that local businesses are struggling to find qualified candidates to hire.

Lombardo pointed out that career academies connect real-world, work-based skills to classroom learning, preparing students for real careers.

“Career academies are promising innovative approaches in education that help students learn the skills employers

need, and expect, in their future workforce,” Lombardo said.

Students of career academies are twice as likely as their classroom peers to be working in computer, engineering or media technology sectors eight years after graduation, according to the study.

According to the report, currently only 39 percent of the state’s 2013 graduates met college readiness benchmarks in the ACT college admissions test on English, math, reading and science.

Jurkovich pointed out that only 21 percent of state residents hold a bachelor’s degree and that, in the future, 47 percent of positions will require post-secondary education in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

“Washington state is struggling to find qualified workers to fill jobs in health care, construction management, finance, architecture, engineering and information technology,” Jurkovich said.

Lombardo said that the lack of a skilled workforce comes at a high cost for the economy.

“Across Washington state, high school dropouts earn \$4.8 billion less over their lifetimes than their high school graduate peers,” she said.

Leahy noted that the common core standards do not dictate a specific curriculum or tell teachers how to teach; they simply provide learning benchmarks to establish what skills students should have mastered at each grade level.

He said the common core standards are an improvement over the WASL, which tested the curriculum more than the student. While high academic standards are important for the business community, “students will need to develop both technical skills and ‘soft skills,’ such as effective collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving,” Johnson said.

Leahy noted that there will undoubtedly be some growing pains when testing in the new system begins in another year and a half.

“In the end students will be better prepared for success in post-secondary education and/or the workforce,” Leahy said. Meanwhile, the new Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) is a warehouse of educational data, where school districts report data on courses, students, and teachers. Course data includes standardized state course codes. Student data includes demographics, enrollment information, schedules, grades and program participation. Teacher data includes demographics, certifications and schedules.

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