

Businesses Continue to Push for Lifelong Learning



Organizations in the United States have long complained that the country's educational system fails to adequately prepare students for the workforce. Now, faced with concerns that demographic changes will make existing skills gaps worse, the business community is taking a stronger role in pushing for improved school performance.

The latest example is a report issued by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Center for American Progress. Titled "Leaders and Laggards," the report essentially grades each state and the District of Columbia in a number of categories, including academic achievement, post-secondary and workforce readiness, and return-on-investment. The study found that data is insufficient

in many states to measure academic progress or drive improvement. Not surprisingly, it also concluded that most states aren't doing enough to prepare students for jobs or higher learning—a theme that's consistent with other recent reports.

The new report card was released with a reform outline that calls for a number of structural changes to the nation's educational systems, including

- improving teacher quality through higher starting salaries and pay-for-performance structures
- placing greater emphasis on student performance as a measure of teacher effectiveness
- permitting greater innovation in educational models, including online learning programs, early college

- enrollment, and apprenticeships
- improving the quantity, quality, and timeliness of data on academic achievement
- emphasizing better management and accountability for principals, superintendents, and other school officials.

Other groups are speaking up, too. A number of organizations, including the Conference Board and the National Center on Education and the Economy, have issued similar papers that call for major overhauls to the U.S. educational system. In addition, the Business-Higher Education Forum created a coalition to recommend law reforms to support business needs. Bill Gates and Eli Broad recently announced a \$60 million campaign called "Strong American Schools." Its goal is to put educational reform on the national agenda for the 2008 presidential races.

Why all the attention on education? The landmark 2002 No Child Left Behind law is due for reauthorization this year, and many organizations see it as an opportunity to strengthen the primary and secondary education pipeline.

And there are reasons to believe that the system needs help. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, a nationwide survey of academic achievement conducted by the federal government, showed that less than 40 percent of high school graduates are proficient in reading, and less than 25 percent are proficient in math. For organizations looking to younger workers to remain competitive, those are worrisome numbers.

Reauthorization of NCLB is a top priority for Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) and Representative George Miller (D-California), chairmen of the Senate and House committees that will tackle the law this year, but it's unclear what form the final bill will take. One thing is certain, however, the business community will not lack a voice.

—Kermit Kaleba

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