

Businesses' steps can boost schools, economy

Minor adjustments can make a major difference for Oregon

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Oregon's economy depends on a well-educated work force. That was the bottom line at the Oregon Leadership Summit, which drew more than 1,000 participants in Portland on Monday.

If those words are just rhetoric, they won't change a thing. If employers commit to doing something about them, they could start to transform Oregon's schools.

One practical solution, dubbed the Employer-Classroom Connection, made its debut at the summit. It's a list of concrete steps that businesses can take to help workers -- with or without kids -- get involved with schools. Now all that's needed is getting far-seeing businesses to sign on. State government should be among the first, since presumably Gov. Ted Kulongoski is the No. 1 champion for this concept.

This initiative builds on surveys by the Chalkboard Project, the foundation-funded effort to improve Oregon's schools. Chalkboard found that 83 percent of those surveyed felt that a lack of parental involvement was the biggest obstacle to student achievement. Conflicts with work schedules were the biggest barrier to volunteering time in classrooms, parents said.

A few companies already pay workers to volunteer in schools, including Wachovia in Salem. But the Employer-Classroom Connection offers simpler options as well, such as allowing parents to go online to check their students' homework assignments. That should make the program work for mom-and-pop businesses as well the heavy-hitters that already have joined -- Intel, Qwest and PGE.

Of course, if this initiative reaches its ambitious goal, schools must be ready to effectively use many thousands of additional volunteers. It would be crazy to turn motivated people away because schools haven't figured out what these people could do for them.

Companies that commit to taking three actions and recording them for three years will be recognized as Oregon Education Champions.

Employers might ask, "So what?" Businesses get hit up all the time to donate money, materials and time to good causes. They're already good corporate citizens.

Perhaps, but this honor roll recognizes something more: companies that understand the vital link between education and the state's success.

Be part of that group. Work for schools, and help schools work for Oregon.

Employer-to-Classroom Challenge

OFFER EMPLOYEES flextime, extended lunch hours or compressed workweeks so they can get involved in school activities.

PROVIDE EMPLOYEES with 10 minutes every day at their computer workstation to check their child's progress or review homework assignments if the information is available online.

ALLOW PAID time off for employees to volunteer in schools.

PROVIDE MENTORS or tutors.

PROVIDE KNOWLEDGEABLE "on-loan" employees to support schools in areas such as financial management, budgeting, data processing and strategic planning.

PROVIDE LEARNING opportunities for teachers and students (job shadows, tours, internships, etc.).

OFFER INCENTIVES such as matching employee donations to schools.

OFFER SPACE at your business for parent-teacher conferences and other school meetings.

Online

For information, go to www.chalkboardproject.org or www.E3oregon.org