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Joe Reagan | Why business cares about education... and you should too

By Joe Reagan

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Ask a corporate leader, “What is the most important issue facing the business community?”

You'll still hear the traditional responses, like our tax code, energy resources, health care costs and workplace regulations. But increasingly, the first answer you'll receive is, “access to an educated workforce.”

As JCPS students head back to school this week, let's reflect on the importance of educational attainment to our region's economic success — and why it will take all of us working together to improve it.

In the past, the economy was driven by institutions. Today, it is driven by individuals. In our current global, knowledge-based economy, companies need more than labor — they need thought and innovation. Self-directed work teams are the norm. Whole layers of management have been forever removed. In short, businesses needed educated workers in every job to grow their businesses and expand our economy.

In our role as an economic development leader for the city, Greater Louisville Inc. hears from companies that are choosing locations to invest and grow based on access to an educated workforce. And right now, this doesn't bode well for Kentucky and its jobs. Our state ranks 47th in the nation for citizens with a high school diploma. Even a recent University of Kentucky study could only report that Kentucky had improved its overall education ranking from 48th in 1990 to 33rd in 2009.

While that improvement is good, lagging behind nearly two-thirds of the states when it comes to educational attainment is not sustainable. And that doesn't even factor in the pressures of global competition. Without educated workers, Greater Louisville simply cannot expect to attract and retain good-paying jobs for our citizens.

Thankfully, the outlook is not all doom and gloom. As a community, we have recognized the problem, and employed the power of innovative thinking to solve it. Education is the business community's number one priority, because we know it is the number one key to growing jobs in the future.

There is a community-wide initiative, 55,000 Degrees, which is working to increase the number of higher education degree holders in metro Louisville by 55,000 people by the year 2020. That number is not just an aspiration; it's the number of additional degree holders Louisville needs to stay economically competitive with our peer cities: 40,000 bachelor's degrees and 15,000 associate's degrees.

Here's how it affects you. If you're a citizen with a high school diploma or some college credit, it's time to give it another try and earn your degree. It's not easy, but the short-term challenges will be far outweighed by the long-term benefits. Resources are available to help you — visit

www.knowhow2goky.org to learn more.

If you're an employer, you can truly encourage your employees to complete their degrees, be it through tuition reimbursement or schedule flexibility. If you focus on education, employees will listen. For information and resources on helping your employees with their educational needs, visit www.55000degrees.org/eeds.

And, of course, while the end goal is higher education degrees, the effort starts in our elementary schools. What happens at JCPS — and in other schools throughout the region — matters. After all, what is learned in the classroom is put to work in the boardroom and on the shop floor. This is why the business community has engaged with JCPS and the Board of Education as they change leadership and work toward a more collaborative, achievement-focused relationship. The leaders, innovators, and workers of tomorrow are sitting in the classrooms of today. And they are the key to growing, attracting and retaining jobs in the region.

If you care about Louisville's economy, connect with www.55000degrees.com. Join the cause to create a world-class, seamless and coordinated education system that develops creativity and critical thinking — all necessary to build a community full of skilled workers, engaged citizens, and civic leaders.

As Mayor Greg Fischer recently pointed out, we will achieve this transformational goal “one degree at a time.” Your engagement and your advocacy will make the difference.

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