

State chamber chief says educators must ‘step on the gas’ with career, workforce development

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It's time for Arkansas' education system to "step on the gas" in preparing students for the workforce, according to Randy Zook, president and CEO of the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce and Associated Industries of Arkansas.

Zook delivered the Dec. 1 address at the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce First Friday Breakfast, pointing to ACT Aspire scores that showed 59% of Arkansas' 3rd-10th graders cannot read at grade level.

"That means that only 40% of our kids are even thinking about being prepared for the postsecondary training and education efforts that they need to prepare themselves to be competitive in a global economy," Zook said.

He continued: "Now the good news is, two years ago it was 61%, so we've moved the needle a little. The bad news is that those of us getting on in years — we're not going to see real progress made at the rate we're going. We have to step on the gas in terms of education and our expectations of education. Now there is a pressure building all over the state to move in this direction, especially business and manufacturing. But we are not feeding the bulldog at this point. We are not getting people skilled up enough, trained up enough, and educated enough to be able to be what we need to be in today's economy. So we've got to demand more from the education delivery system, and that includes K-12, two-year, four-year, apprenticeship programs — everything that undertakes to educate and prepare kids for career or college."

Zook said the state had “to do better,” adding that more good news was “there has been a very positive response out of the legislature on these growing demands.” He also said K-12 leaders were “responding positively.”

ENORMOUS RESPONSIBILITY

But with 700,000 of Arkansas’ 1.35 million-person workforce earning \$21,000 or less annually (around \$10 per hour), Zook said, more attention would need to be given to skills that matter.

“With our career and technical education system, volumes have been written, hours of TV shows have been produced, chronicling the fact that we threw away most career and technical education about 30 or 40 years ago. We were all going to be doctors and lawyers and, God help us, consultants, and not have to do much. We weren’t going to have to make anything or do anything or fix anything or run anything or dig anything out of the ground. Life was going to be good. We’d live off the fruit of the land. That didn’t quite work out.”

Zook said there were 30,000 jobs around the state open that could not be filled for lack of qualified candidates.

“Everywhere I go, all across the state, every day, I hear from business owners. I had a company last week say, ‘I’ve been looking for four mechanical engineers for two years.’ And I said, ‘What’s the problem? Are you not paying enough or offering enough?’ He said, ‘No, they don’t want to move to my community. It’s that simple.’ And that’s a big problem.”

The business community, Zook said, has “to recognize that we have an enormous responsibility as well as opportunity to step into this.”

Zook continued: “Education is too important to leave up to the educators, with all due respect to them. We have got to be the voice of the customer. We have got to demand that kids be able to read when they get out of high school, that they be able to do a reasonable amount of math, that they be able to understand instructions. We’ll work on the attendance part, the show-up part. But they’ve got to have these basic skills. Otherwise they’re just going to be economic roadkill and Arkansas will continue to languish in the middle of the pack or even in the lower half of the pack in terms of the other states.”

NOTHING OUT OF LITTLE ROCK

Zook acknowledged the topic could be a “controversial” one and later said that he and Benny Gooden, former Fort Smith Public Schools Superintendent/current Executive Director of Institutional Relations at the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education, had debated the topic in the past and that Gooden “has taught me a lot about how to be patient about this.”

“It doesn’t happen overnight. It cannot happen overnight. My point is, we just need to step on the gas sooner than later,” Zook said.

Gooden was in attendance at the event and acknowledged more needed to be done to improve career and technical education, but turned some of the blame back toward Little Rock and state lawmakers.

“Right here in western Arkansas 15 years ago, we finally got it (career/tech education) done, I think, when we started the Western Arkansas Technical Center (WATC). And that didn’t happen because of anything of leadership that came from Little Rock. That came from leadership on this campus (UAFS) when the late Joel Stubblefield was president, and from the school leaders of the 25 schools in this area,” Gooden said, emphasizing, “We formed the Western Arkansas Technical Center (WATC). Now that’s one, and it was pointed out this morning, and that’s great. But we ought to be doing that all over the state of Arkansas.”

Gooden continued: “What I noticed in three decades of watching that process in the state of Arkansas is that it’s costly to provide good career technical education that’s on par with what you find in every industry in this community so that young people have used up-to-date equipment to learn on so that when they go to work for you, they don’t cost you money and tear up your equipment. It costs money to do that, and we have not been willing at the state level to make significant investments in that process in the 30 years I’ve been observing it.”

To Zook, Gooden said, “You need to tell the state that it costs a little bit to get good results, and the state’s going to have to step up and do it.”

Comments