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Vision 2015 touted as critical to upgrading education in Del.

Without top-notch schools, students, Delaware can't compete for new businesses, say experts at UD event

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NEWARK -- If Delaware wants to attract more businesses -- and more jobs -- it needs a top-flight educational system.

The reasoning may sound circular, but it has merit: States value businesses. Businesses value highly skilled workers. Highly skilled workers value education for their children.

But when businesses consider moving to Delaware, they see a "mediocre" education system, which is why the First State must implement the Vision 2015 school reform plan, said James Wolfe, Delaware State Chamber of Commerce president.

"Delaware ranks in the middle of the nation when it comes to education. We have to change that if we want to attract and retain jobs," Wolfe said. "Education is the cornerstone of economic development. Today's students are tomorrow's work force."

That was the message repeated Thursday at the University of Delaware's third "Creating Knowledge-Based Partnerships" conference as business leaders linked public education to the prosperity of the state and country. This installment examined the steps required to execute Vision 2015, which aims to revamp Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015.

Sir Michael Barber, who as senior adviser to British Prime Minister Tony Blair transformed the United Kingdom's public education system, said because America's public education is declining, economic consequences have followed.

"It is one thing in the global economy to offshore unskilled jobs because labor is cheaper elsewhere. It's quite another to offshore highly-skilled jobs simply because the qualified work force can't be found -- but too often this has become the reality," he said. "The long-term future success of the American economy will depend on significantly improving the U.S. school system."

The Vision 2015 plan, which was released in October 2006 by a coalition of education, business and community leaders, suggests reforms such as longer school years, a statewide curriculum, more power and accountability for school principals, data-driven instruction, a uniform statewide pay scale for teachers and greater investment in preschool education.

No direct support from state

Vision 2015, estimated to cost more than \$100 million over several years, has generated some private support but no direct support from the state, which is critical to the plan's success.

"The goals of Vision 2015 are ambitious ones but also essential ones for both our state and the

country," said UD President Patrick Harker.

Barber said educational attainment has stagnated in the United States in the last 25 years while other countries have begun to catch up.

"In the 1960s, the U.S. led the world in high school qualifications and Korea was 27th. Now Korea leads the world and the U.S. is 13th and falling," Barber said. "As recently as 1995, the U.S. was second in the world on college-level graduation rates. Just a decade later, it has slipped to 14th."

Twelfth-graders in the U.S. perform below the average of 21 other countries in both math and science, said Thomas Connelly Jr., DuPont Co.'s executive vice president.

Furthermore, the U.S. education system reinforces children's socioeconomic differences by reinforcing "the advantages of the already advantaged," Barber said.

"Often, more money per student is spent in wealthier areas than poorer ones," he said. "If all young people are to reach high standards, as No Child Left Behind envisages, then the system has to provide greater support to those with furthest to go."

The federal NCLB law requires all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014.

Barber also said too much of education funding doesn't get to the classroom: "Good administration matters, but every dollar spent on unnecessary administration is a dollar that could have assisted that welfare child to reach for the stars."

Paul Herdman -- president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, the educational nonprofit that helped develop the Vision 2015 plan -- said Delaware has a real possibility of being a national leader if the state learns from Britain's successes.

In just five years, teaching went from the 94th most popular profession in England to the first. Barber credits the status change to increasing teacher salaries by 10 percent. By using best practices in the classroom, the number of students meeting the target standards in literacy increased from 63 percent to 75 percent in just three years, Barber said.

"If England's 17 million students and 24,000 schools can make that significant improvement over an eight-year period, I'm confident that Delaware can make similar gains perhaps even faster," Herdman said.

Connelly said for DuPont to compete in a global economy, the Wilmington-based company needs a highly skilled work force.

"Businesses depend on the talent and the skills of the people they hire," he said. "So public education affects the strengths of our businesses and the prosperities of the communities in which we live."

Developing best practices

In an effort to support implementation of the Vision 2015 plan, Harker announced the creation of the University of Delaware Education Institute. The institute will bring together UD faculty members and educators throughout the state to develop and research best practices. It also will provide Delaware teachers and administrators with professional development and opportunities to earn graduate degrees.

Because Delaware is such a small state, it has an opportunity to lead the country as a "model state laboratory," Harker said.

Successful education reform, however, is as much about means as it is about ends, Barber said. "Getting the policy right is difficult to be sure, but it is relatively easy compared to making it happen, consistently and effectively, so that the benefits are felt in every classroom."

That's why, Herdman said, Delaware needs to support Vision 2015 now with a new sense of urgency.

"We cannot wait. Our window of opportunity is right now," he said. "If we develop a partnership between the private sector and the next administration, we have a chance to move things forward immediately."
