

SUBJECT: Improving the K-12 Education System

SUBMITTED BY: Youth, Education, and Training Committee

BACKGROUND

Worldwide the most challenging and important economic race in the 21st century will be the global competition for talent and workers. Future sustainable and growth in Saskatchewan will require economic prosperity and opportunity for every Saskatchewanian. These requirements are built on the foundation of a quality, agile, well-rounded education, an education that prepares youth for the challenges of today and tomorrow. To ensure every child receives a quality education, the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce (SCC) believes there needs to be a larger focus on human talent, effective systems, innovation, accountability and measurement.

Recognizing that today's students are tomorrow's workforce, the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce has made the improvement of public education one of its top priorities. The framework for engagement of business advocacy groups in the development of stronger K-12 education has been well documented and has cumulated in the American Chamber of Commerce Executives Eight Principles for Education Leadership. These principles are:

1) Prioritize & Commit

Education transformation is often measured in decades, not quarters. Progress will feel glacial and setbacks are inevitable. If you choose to engage in this tough issue, make sure it is a top priority for your organization and that your leaders are committed for the long haul.

2) Maintain Focus, Avoid Distractions

There is always a new initiative in the education realm looking for a champion, and your chamber can easily fall victim to "flavor of the month" syndrome. Set ambitious, measurable outcomes that fit your organization and then stick with them. Resist the temptation to chase the latest education fad. However, your sharp focus will also help you spot innovative approaches and projects which can help you leapfrog ahead on the issues you previously identified.

3) Be The Truth Teller

Someone has to send a clear signal to parents, teachers and students about the skills employers will need and about the shortfalls in performance. A trusted source has to publicly acknowledge victory and failure. Someone must be willing to say when outcomes are unacceptable and celebrate success as we would any grand endeavor. The business community is the credible voice to articulate whether graduates are ready to work! Get agreement on the facts and create a

shared view of reality before everyone launches into policy or program debate. Be careful of introducing new sets of facts which cloud the clarity of knowing your numbers. Understand where your community stands on key education indicators and communicate hard facts to members and the larger community. Push for data-driven decisions.

4) Build Awareness, But Focus on Results

Businesses leaders understand that the education system is a problem we can't afford not to solve. Continue to beat the drum, but remember that awareness alone is not enough. You must move quickly to action that produces outcomes. Shared accountability across all stakeholders, including the business community, is critical so that we don't get lost in activity rather than achieving results.

5) Know and Respect Roles and Responsibilities

We don't want to do to educators what government sometimes does to us: "Hi, we're from the business community and we're here to help you teach." The educators are on the scene. They are the experts. Business leaders know how to ask tough but thoughtful questions and we know how to focus on outcomes. The combination of roles can be powerful. We can help educators get clarity, cut across silos, think differently. They can help us understand the real facts, the best practices and the daunting challenges facing kids and parents today.

6) Be the Convener

The chamber is uniquely positioned to bring diverse interests together. You have the asking rights to invite administrators, parents, union bosses, community foundations, charter school principals, clergy, elected officials and business leaders to the same table. Partner with other credible, change-oriented groups. The business community's power to convene is limited though. We are not elected or authorized to drive education change. For successful change, there will be many "tables" in the community discussion, so we need be good hosts and good guests.

7) Public Policy is Fundamental

It's fine to begin your education-related initiative with programs and awareness, but if you aspire to real transformation, you'll have to shape public policy, probably at the state level. You don't have to tackle the toughest legislation first, but dive into the policy questions that matter.

8) Courage is Needed

Whether it's voting out an obstructionist school board member or giving cover to a bold, superintendent, at some point your work in education will become controversial and, unfortunately, personal. Timidity doesn't work any better in education politics than it does in municipal politics.

ISSUE

Future development of a workforce, with skills and knowledge, starts in the classroom and extends into the length of a person's working career. The reality is, the Saskatchewan public school system is not adequately preparing students for post-secondary education, workforce entrance, or entrepreneurial opportunities. The province continues to lag both internationally and among its peer provinces in K-12 student performance as per the latest PISA results. The impact of this over the long term will be significant and will undermine the province's ability to compete globally.

To strengthen K-12 education, the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce is advocating for:

- Accountability for student's academic achievements
- Support for teachers
- Options for parents and students
- Academic standards that are realigned for post-secondary and career.

The Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce recognizes that our province cannot produce the skilled workforce of tomorrow unless our schools successfully educate our students today.

RECOMMENDED

- 1) That in order to guide the SCC's actions in this area, the "*8 Principles of Engagement*", as created by the American Chamber of Commerce Executives, will be utilized. These Principles are a concise summary of the findings from years of experience in this area by hundreds of Chambers of Commerce in America.
- 2) That the SCC support the Ministry of Education in the launch of the *Student First Plan* which is about unifying and re-orienting the education system on the student. The SCC will develop and hold accountable educational leaders and administrators in implementing the *Student First Plan* and make recommendations when needed.
- 3) That the SCC encourage and, where possible, foster a closer relationship between Saskatchewan's K-12 and university and technical school systems to achieve a seamless transition from high school to higher education and the workplace.
- 4) That the SCC develop a plan for high school educational opportunities that focuses on workplace competencies which are needed locally or in key industries by working with partners and members.