

In My View: Maximizing economic opportunity

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“Ready to learn, ready to work, ready to succeed.”

Those are the watchwords of the continuum of Learning, a community partnership among the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Central Illinois and the Sangamon County Community Foundation.

The Continuum of Learning is about ensuring that this community has the human resources needed to support the economic enterprises that will spur economic development. But economic development and economic opportunity are two faces of the same coin. So when we talk about the Continuum of Learning we’re also talking about a community effort to maximize economic opportunity for people who live and work in this region.

Some facts:

* In Illinois, 35 percent of people between the ages of 25 and 64 who have less than a high school education do not participate in the work force, compared to 24 percent of people who are high school graduates and 15 percent of people with bachelor’s degrees.

* In Springfield, the median income of those between the ages of 25 and 64 who have a high school education or less is about \$25,000. The median income of those who have an associates or baccalaureate degree is about \$43,000.

The more education, the greater the likelihood a person participates in the work force. With participation in the work force at higher level jobs comes increased income.

How do we maximize economic opportunity? How do we create the human resources needed to undergird economic development and to attract businesses?

Education is the path. But not education in the sense that we usually think about it, something that the schools and colleges take care of. We’re talking about a community commitment to seeing that the highest possible proportion of children, adolescents and young adults are progressing successfully through each stage of development and are poised to succeed and to contribute to the region’s economy.

* That preschoolers have had early childhood experiences that make them ready to learn.

* That elementary school children master the intellectual, social and motivational skills appropriate to their age.

* That students emerge from high school with the cognitive and interpersonal skills needed for entering the work force or for being successful in college and other post-secondary opportunities.

* That students are retained and graduate from local colleges and other post-secondary programs with the knowledge and skills that are critical to the economic growth of Sangamon County.

* And that adults have opportunities for the continuing education needed to reach their highest employment potential.

A high degree of success at each stage is needed to maximize the proportion of people who will be successful at the next stage. For example, students who enter kindergarten with experiences that have made them “ready to learn” are going to have an easier time mastering the challenges of the early school grades than students who enter school without the childhood experiences that make them “ready to learn.”

The Continuum of Learning has five Action Teams, involving about 150 team members from all corners of the community, working to define exactly what we mean by success at each of the stages. In other words, our aim is to establish measurable targets — and strategies to achieve those targets.

Those of us working on the Continuum of Learning project are convinced that we’re all in this together: schools, social service agencies and business. It is enormously significant that all three organizations — the Chamber, the United Way, and Sangamon County Community Foundation — are on the same page when it comes to the centrality of community collaboration for achieving the twin goals of maximizing economic opportunity for individuals, while at the same time promoting the economic development of the region. Working together, the organizations will achieve the greatest possible community impact.

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